

## Protected

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## Protected

by Anonymous

### Summary

“I don’t care about anything like I care about you. Not even this kingdom. My place is with you.”

--

Dream is the Crown Prince and the future king. His sworn duty is to protect his kingdom from outside threats, especially from the scourge of magic.

George is his best friend and, technically, his servant. And he has a secret.

### Notes

The people in this fic are characters based on online personas. Everything written here is just for fun and obviously totally fictional. If any of the real people mentioned express discomfort about fic being written about them, I’ll adjust accordingly.

The premise of this fic is taken from the BBC show Merlin, but you don't need to know anything whatsoever about the show to read this fic - it doesn't borrow characters or plots from the show, and I've even put my own spin on the premise. The main character

relationship in Merlin maps really well onto the Dream & George dynamic, which is where I took inspiration. The fic is totally standalone.

Thank you so much for reading!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

# childhood

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### *five*

The sun cast golden hues over the land as it began to set, dipping slightly below the enormous parapets and spires of the King's towering castle, which stood grandly in the center of the sprawling city of Camelot. As the day's activities began to wind to a close, merchants returned home with their unsold products, chambermaids and servants chatted aimlessly as they drifted out of the castle for their quarters, and a young, dark-haired boy played on the grounds just within the castle walls.

The boy, whose name was George, wasn't using much more than a few crudely-designed sticks and twigs for his play, and he was alone; but his enthusiasm and imagination made up for those shortcomings. A flat, broad piece of wood served as his shield and a few cleverly fashioned twigs made up his sword as he slashed and parried the air, letting out small cries of victory every time he defeated an imaginary opponent.

"Take that, take *that*!" he muttered, his eyes glimmering in the orange light cast by the setting sun. He was no older than five or six years old, gangly and short, his head a little too big for the rest of his body. Though he was inside the castle walls, his clothes looked no better than the average commoner's; they were made of rough material, well-worn and slightly dirty, and only collected more dust as he rolled on the ground, wrestling with the air.

"*For Camelot!*" George roared bravely before charging forward and immediately tripping over a clod of earth.

He hit the ground with an *oof* and his sword flew out of his hands. Groaning, George pulled himself up and started scanning the ground for his prized possession, rubbing his shoulder where it had made contact with the earth.

"Looking for this?" came an unexpected voice from his left.

George jumped and whirled around, where he saw another boy, his age, standing a few paces away and inspecting his toy sword with amusement. The newcomer had lighter hair and hazelly green eyes, and his clothes were much nicer, colored with expensive dyes and obviously made with much finer materials. Unlike George, this was a child that seemed to belong within the walls of the castle.

George felt a jolt of nervousness at being caught on the castle grounds, but after quickly looking around and seeing no adults nearby to shoo him away, that emotion was quickly overtaken by the urge to retrieve his favorite sword. "That's mine," he said, stepping forward and holding his hand out. "Give it back, please?"

The newcomer sort of laughed, though not meanly, turning the twigs over in his hand. "Did you make this?"

"Yes," George said, shifting nervously. He knew it wasn't very good, but he was proud of it; it had taken him ages to figure out the knots that tied the twigs together in the vague form of a

sword.

"I like it," the other boy said, and George blinked in surprise. "What's your name?"

George felt nervous, thinking he probably shouldn't give his real name in case he was getting in trouble, and scrambled for the first different name he could think of. "Uh.... um.... it's Clay," he stumbled, his face immediately burning in embarrassment.

The other boy threw his head back and laughed uproariously. "No, it's not," he giggled. "You are a really bad liar."

"Okay, fine, it's George," said the dark-haired boy, rubbing the back of his head. "Now can I *please* have that back?"

"Hmm," the boy said, thinking about it. "That depends. You think you can take it from me?" He held the handle of the sword with two hands, his eyes glinting mischievously.

George stood awkwardly for a second. He wasn't even sure if he was allowed to do this, to be talking to – to a royal's son, or whoever this boy was. But on the other hand, he was being *really* annoying.

"I don't know," George said slowly, waiting for the other boy to relax a little, looking disappointed. "Maybe... I *will*," and then he lunged for the sword.

The light-haired boy pulled back just in time, peeling with delighted laughter, and took off across the lawn. George took chase and they raced around the castle grounds, wrestling over the sword and pushing each other around playfully. As fast as George could run, the other boy always seemed just a tiny bit faster, and he clearly knew the castle grounds like the back of his hand.

Finally, George managed to tackle him to the ground and pinned him there, practically sitting on top of him as he wrenched the sword from his hands.

"There," he panted, sticky with the summer humidity, and pointing his makeshift sword directly at the other boy's chest. "I win. HA."

For a second, the other boy actually looked surprised, or maybe angry? and George felt his blood run a little cold, wondered if he had just made a big mistake. If he should have let the other boy win.

But then his face split into a big smile, and he pushed George off of him cheerily, pulling himself up and then extending a hand. "Good one, George," he said. "That was fun."

George relaxed and took his hand, letting him pull him up. With his target in hand and the sun almost totally set by now, he started shuffling to the side. "...um, well, I should probably go home now, it's getting sort of late..."

"Yeah, me too... but hey, George?"

"What?" George asked, turning back towards the light-haired boy.

Before he could even think to react, the boy had lunged in and snatched the sword from his grip. He ran a few paces away, holding it in the air triumphantly and grinning.

"I win!" the other boy smirked, jogging backwards towards the castle.

“Hey, not fair!” George protested, starting after him again.

“Sorry, gotta go inside now. You have to come back tomorrow if you want it,” the other boy said in a sing-song voice.

“Ugh, *fine*, you’re so annoying,” George groaned, causing the other kid to laugh. He watched him nearly reach the castle before thinking to call, “wait, how will I find you? What’s your name?”

Right as the boy reached one of the castle’s side doors, he turned and flashed that enormous grin once again. “It’s Clay,” he said before disappearing from sight.

George walked home in stunned silence, his face permanently red so that even by the time he reached the small cottage where he lived with his grandmother, she could see the color and asked him if something was wrong. He shook his head mutely, unable to explain that he was torn between wondering if his new friend had merely played a trick on him, or if he had really spent the afternoon tackling the Crown Prince of Camelot to the ground.

## *eight*

Clay’s hands gripped tightly onto a branch of the willow tree where he was crouched in a fork amongst its branches. He peered out from his favorite hiding place through the shifting leaves, looking for a sign of his pursuers.

“Oh, Clayyy...” came a familiar sing-song, making him snicker and crouch lower in the branches. “Come out, come out, wherever you are...”

Through the leaves, he could see two figures passing by: one dark-haired, stocky and devious-looking, the other tall and gangly with reddish hair. They were his castle friends, Sapnap and Bad, prowling the grounds in search of him.

Even at eight years old, Clay knew the grounds better than most adults, and could often stay hidden for hours before being caught by his friends. But as he hunched lower in the tree, watching Sapnap and Bad pass him by unwittingly, something made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, as though –

“GOT YOU!” came a high-pitched scream from right behind him, and Clay just barely turned around in time to see George pouncing at him through the branches.

“AH!” Clay shouted as George tackled him, and they tumbled out of the tree together, laughing hysterically.

“How did you know I was there?!” Clay asked incredulously, picking himself up and dusting off his clothes.

“You always hide in that stupid tree,” George grinned as Sapnap and Bad came running up to them.

“Nice work, George,” Sapnap said triumphantly while Bad jumped up and down in excitement, saying “our plan worked perfectly!!”

“Okay, you guys are getting better at this, I admit it,” Clay said sheepishly, shaking his head. “I’ll just have to find better places to hide next time...”

“Nah, I like beating you,” Sapnap said as the four boys started to walk across the castle grounds. It was the middle of the day, and the castle was alive with activity. Servants rushed in and out with their chores, the chimneys from the kitchen poured out smoke as the cooks prepared the evening meal, and just coming over the horizon...

“The knights!” Bad shouted in excitement as the boys caught sight of the King’s guard going through their training paces. Sapnap and Bad raced off to watch, while Clay and George followed at a walk.

“Do those two ever run out of energy?” George asked as they watched the other two boys sprint towards the training grounds.

“You should see them during school,” Clay responded dryly, and George giggled.

“Prince Clay?” came a sudden exclamation, and Clay winced as he stopped, turning to see Miriam, his... ‘guardian,’ rushing towards him. Miriam was an older woman, tall and severe in her black dress, her graying hair tied back perfectly in a bun, and her face was pinched and displeased as she rushed towards him.

“Prince Clay,” she said again in shock and disapproval, “whatever happened to your clothes?”

Clay looked down and saw that his day clothes had been dirtied and scratched by his romp through the branches and sighed, his stomach sinking. “I’m sorry, Miriam. I was just playing.”

“I’m sure you were,” Miriam said, shooting a piercing look over Clay’s head and towards George, who Clay could practically feel shrinking away. Clay scowled and stepped further in front of George, making Miriam return her focus to him. “And your lessons, Prince Clay? Did you bother with any of those today?”

“I finished them all earlier, Miriam,” Clay said in annoyance, biting back harsher words. “Now, I’m going to watch my father’s knights.”

Miriam sighed. “I suppose their training would be good for you to observe.... fine. But you’re washing up before dinner. No Crown Prince should be seen in society wearing clothes like that,” she said pointedly, casting one last withering look at George before swishing away in her long robes.

Clay let out an enormous groan as she vanished, pressing his small hands into his face. “Oh my *god* she is so annoying.”

“She’s your guardian,” George said hesitantly, his voice much smaller than usual. “Isn’t she sort of supposed to annoy you...?”

“She’s not my guardian, that’s such a stupid word,” Clay insisted as they resumed their walk towards the training ground. “She’s a *babysitter*, and I hate it.”

George stuffed his hands in his pockets before admitting, “her voice is pretty horrible.”

“*Prince Clay*,” Clay mocked, using a high, nasally voice, and George snorted. “*How dare you place your royal feet upon such disgusting grass?!*”

*“Prince Clay,” George joined in, “dost thou knowest that the air you breathe contains DUST?!! What shall the royal lungs think?!”*

Clay burst into laughter as they finally reached the training grounds, but once they were close enough to see the crowd of nobles gathered to watch the knights, George pulled to a halt.

“I think I’ll probably leave,” George said, shifting from side to side.

“Why?” Clay asked curiously.

“Um...” George shrugged, looking uncomfortable. “Just don’t want to watch the knights.”

Clay furrowed his brow as he looked back at the training grounds, then shrugged and walked back towards George. “Okay. I’ve seen it at least a million times. I’ll go with you.”

George looked surprised, but grinned, and the two boys walked away from the crowd, taking a random, meandering path back through the castle grounds. The two of them often did this after playing their games with Sapnap and Bad; as close as the four of them were, Clay and George seemed to stick together a little tighter. For one thing, Clay always felt like the other two kids would let him win sometimes, like everyone else in the castle always did. Being Crown Prince sometimes felt like everyone treated him with gloves, afraid to break him as though he were made of glass. George never made him feel like that, even if it involved getting his nose rubbed in the dirt every now and then. When they talked, as they did often, Clay felt like he could tell George anything, especially things that Sapnap and Bad, as the sons of nobles, might not have liked to hear.

“What do you even learn about in those stupid lessons, anyway?” George asked when their conversation returned back to Miriam’s appearance.

“Mostly boring stuff, like history and math and things,” Clay said, kicking a rock as they passed it. They walked past a fallen log, which Clay jumped onto and walked on while balancing.

“Ah, so Prince Clay can someday run the kingdom?” George asked with a crooked grin, clearly not knowing the way Clay’s stomach always flipped when someone said something like that.

“I hate that name,” he said, choosing to ignore the rest of the sentence.

“What? *Prince Clay*?” George asked, affecting the same high-pitched tone as earlier. Clay shot him a look as he jumped off the log.

“Yes,” he responded honestly. “It’s all I hear, day in, day out. Prince Clay, your presence is requested. Prince Clay, stop eating tarts before dinner, Prince Clay, get inside so we can lock you back up in your tower like a lonely princess...”

George giggled and asked, “well, what would you like to be called instead?”

“Probably... George,” Clay responded, then laughed as George shoved him with his shoulder. “Just kidding.”

They walked in companionable silence for a little while, listening to the bugs whirl in the grass and the trees, before Clay spoke again. “I do have one idea.”

“Oh yeah?” George asked.

“Yeah,” and Clay suddenly felt embarrassed, like the whole thing was silly. He looked at George, though, and the other boy didn’t look like he was mocking or making fun. He just had that earnest, interested look he usually had on his face, the one that made Clay feel like George actually listened to him.

“So, you know how some knights choose new names for themselves when they’re knighted? It’s like, you leave your old identity, and you take on a new one, in service to Camelot. You know?”

“I didn’t know, but it sounds interesting.”

“It’s awesome,” Clay said with genuine admiration. “It’s like – it’s like saying you don’t really matter, you know? Not even your name. What matters is that you’re a knight and you’re there to protect the kingdom, no matter the cost. I think it’s very cool.”

George’s forehead furrowed a little. “Is that something you’ll do when you become a knight?”

“I can’t,” Clay said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. “Sapnap and Bad could if they want, when they become knights. But you can’t if you’re a Prince. Which is why it sucks.”

George hummed in understanding. “Well... if you could choose a new name, what would it be?”

Clay hesitated again, even though he knew his answer. “Uhm... well, that part is actually kind of stupid.”

“Why?” George asked, as their path took them into a small grove of trees where they often spent time. The trees provided shade and a cool breeze rustled the leaves as the boys started to clamber on top of a pile of broad, smooth rocks that stood in the middle of the small clearing.

“It’s something my mother used to talk about,” Clay mumbled. “Before.”

George went quiet for a little while. “That’s definitely not stupid,” he finally said as they sat down on the highest rock, sitting cross-legged across from each other, and Clay glanced at him in relief. The dark-haired boy’s face was serious and contemplative. *Of course*, Clay thought. George had never treated him awkwardly when Clay talked about his mother. George had lost his mother, too, and his father as well, to the same war that had taken Clay’s.

“She used to say that dreams were this powerful weapon,” Clay started rushing, the words just pouring out of him, the ones he had thought over a hundred times before. “That they were the closest thing you could get to *good* magic, and probably more powerful. And I’ve just – I’ve always really liked that. I like the idea of taking something away from the sorcerers, and using it against them.” At this point he hit his fist against his knee with enthusiasm, getting angry, as he always did, at the thought of magic. “So if I could. I think that’s the name I’d choose. Dream.”

George had gone even quieter, and more still, than he had before, looking down at his hands and away from Clay. Clay glanced away as well and felt bad. He knew magic was a sore spot for George, too. When the sorcerers had attacked Camelot years ago, dozens of villagers and nobles alike had died under the onslaught. There were no sorcerers in Camelot anymore, thanks to Clay’s father, but even saying the word ‘magic’ could be enough to scare and anger those who had been burned by it.

“What do you think?” Clay prompted after a little while, and George looked up in surprise,



blinking in the dappled sunlight, as though he had been pulled into his thoughts. “About the name?”

“Dream,” George tried out, humming thoughtfully. Then he flashed his lopsided smile. “I like it. Dreeeaaaamm,” he exaggerated in a sing-song voice, and Clay laughed.

“Well, it’ll never happen, anyway,” Clay said, picking up a twig off the top of the stone and throwing it away absently. “To everyone in the whole entire world, I’ll be *Prince Clay* forever.”

“Well, I could call you Dream, if you want me to,” George said, seeming a bit like his old self again.

“Really?” Clay asked, feeling himself grin.

“Sure. It’s like a nickname, or, or, like a secret code name,” George said, jumping to his feet and striking a knightly pose. “To the whole rest of the world, you’re Clay, but between you and me, and maybe those other two jokers, we know your real name is... *Dream*, defender of Camelot!” he shouted triumphantly into the forest, launching himself off the rock and landing on his feet.

Clay (-- *Dream*, he tried out in his head) stood up as well, chuckling. “Okay, then. I like it.” He picked up a stick at his feet and held it in the air like a sword. “Sir Dream, knight of the round table! Killer of sorcerers!”

He took the same leap as George and by the time he landed, George had already run off into the forest, throwing a taunt over his shoulder. “Come on then, sir knight — you gonna catch me or what?”

Dream grinned wickedly and barreled into the forest after him.

### *thirteen*

“Look at him! Look!! He’s blushing,” Sapnap cackled as George jogged to join the trio of teenagers waiting at the edge of the forest.

“Hey guys, sorry I’m late,” George said, panting slightly for breath. “What’s going on?”

“Dream’s got a girlfriend,” Bad teased from the rock he was sitting on.

“I do not,” Dream snapped shortly from the tree he leaned against, crossing his arms petulantly. At thirteen, Dream had grown at least a head over his friends, rivaled only by Bad; he had already started to grow into himself, having begun to lose the gangly awkwardness inherent to being a young adult. *Kingly genes*, George often teased him, usually earning him a punch in the arm.

“He so does,” Sapnap snickered as George tried to catch up with their conversation. Unlike Sapnap and Bad, dressed comfortably in their well-made clothes of leather and linen, George was dressed somewhat warmly for the hot summer day in his woolen tunic and trousers. He also wore the nice leather boots Dream had given him during the new year’s celebration, already nearly worn through from daily use.

“Something to tell the class?” George jabbed when Dream made eye contact with him. The prince just rolled his eyes away, obviously annoyed, and George smirked.

“This girl won’t leave me alone and these two jesters seem to think it’s meant to be,” Dream muttered, pushing away from the tree to walk towards George. “I’m *really* ready to drop it. You know the way or what?” he asked George as he passed by, brushing against his shoulder.

“Yes, your Kingliness, sir, anything you wish,” George quipped, mock-bowing to Dream’s back as Sapnap and Bad snickered. They fell into step behind him as George started to direct them through the thick forest that spread for miles behind the King’s castle.

“It is the *perfect* day for this,” Bad piped up from the end of the line, prompting nods from the other boys.

“If I’m honest, I’m surprised you all got out of your lessons for the day,” George said, resulting in an uncharacteristic silence from the other boys. “...guys?”

“About that,” Sapnap said, and the three dissolved into chuckles.

“We’re skipping!” Bad cried joyfully.

“What?!” George asked in outrage, pulling up short.

“George, it’s no big deal,” Dream said, pausing to shoot him a look.

“Won’t you get in trouble? I don’t know if you remember the last time the three of you were castle-locked, but I didn’t get to see any of you for a month,” George grumbled.

Dream just rolled his eyes and grabbed George’s arm, pulling him along. “George, that was like four years ago. I can do whatever I want now. The only person who can ground me is my dad and he doesn’t care what I do. Now show us where this stupid lake is. I want to go swimming.”

George groaned and shoved Dream back. “Fine, then let me lead for once, you big dunce.”

George led capably through the thick woods that his friends rarely had reason to venture into except for royal hunts (a wholly graceless affair which usually led to more destruction than plunder). He spent most of his time here, actually, either hunting small game using his own contraptions or searching for various herbs and ingredients that his grandmother, a healer, needed for her practice. He felt a small rush of pride as he directed his friends around a particularly nasty wasp’s nest, pointed out a small sinkhole in the path, and finally guided them through a thicket of thorns unscathed before they finally emerged to find a small, crystal-clear lake, fed by a branch of the river that cleaved Camelot’s forest nearly in two. Small sandy beaches and rocks surrounded the water, and the tall trees of the forest on all sides provided a beautiful backdrop.

“Here we are, boys,” George said, but his words were practically drowned out by Sapnap’s excited holler, who immediately stripped off his outer garments to leap into the water with only his shorts. George chuckled and shook his head as Bad ran after him, taking the entry into the water a little more cautiously, and then turned to see Dream looking around the small grove with a wondrous expression.

“This is amazing, George,” Dream said genuinely. When he looked George’s way, the sunlight caught his eyes and made them practically shine. “How did you find this place?”

“Stumbled on it while looking for hemlock for my gran,” George responded, suddenly feeling awkward. “You like it?”

"I *love* it," Dream said, and George felt a rush of warmth. "Come on!"

Soon, the two of them were jumping into the water as well, laughing uproariously. The water was perfect, cool and clear, and the four boys took turns diving in, swimming laps and dunking each other under water. The sun warmed their skin every time they came up for air. They were perfectly content.

After a few hours, George and Dream sat in comfortable silence, sunning themselves on a large, flat stone near the water, while Sapnap and Bad continued tormenting each other in the lake.

"You've really never seen anybody else out here?" Dream asked, closing his eyes and tilting his face towards the sun contentedly. He couldn't believe this hidden spot wasn't more popular with the nearby villagers. It was almost too perfect to be real.

"No," George responded sleepily from his side, stretching out on the stone. "And I come out here all the time, it's..."

George suddenly stopped, sitting up ramrod-straight. His eyes were wide and his whole body went tense at once, as though he had just been shocked.

"What's wrong?" Dream asked immediately, sitting up as well and looking at him with concern.

"There's something –,"

"Clay, look out!" Sapnap suddenly shouted, and the use of his real name caused Dream to immediately grab George's arm and pull them both to the side.

The place they had been sitting only a second earlier was suddenly showered with arrows. They clattered and smashed onto the rocks as George yelped in surprise, and Dream yanked him behind a tall vertical rock where they cowered, panting for breath.

"So it *was* the Crown Prince we just saw," came a voice from the woods that made Dream's blood run cold. He peeked over the top of the rock and saw a group of men emerge from the tree line, wielding bows and swords, and he cursed under his breath.

"Bandits?" George whispered and Dream nodded.

"Hey, assholes," Sapnap roared bravely from the water, where he swam quickly to reach the edge of the lake, "what's your problem? You really think trying to murder the Prince in cold blood is a good move, motherfuckers?"

"Prince Clay," said a man with a dark beard and a bow in his hand, "we have no quarrel with your friends. Come out and face us and we will let them escape unharmed."

Dream's pulse picked up in his ears as he saw several bandits take aim at Sap and Bad, who were momentarily suspended, defenseless, in the water. He looked desperately for something to defend himself with, but they had brought nothing, no weapons of any kind – even his clothes were lying in a heap on the other side of the lake...

"Shit," Dream said, "okay," and then turned to George, whose face was pale and nervous. "It'll be okay," he said, trying to force his voice to sound calm, the way his father always sounded in moments of crisis. "They won't kill me, they'll just... use me for ransom, or something. Just stay here, okay?"

*“Dream,”* he heard George whisper harshly, but Clay was already standing, putting his hands in the air and walking slowly towards the bandits.

“Fine,” he called out, “just... leave them alone,” and approached the line of marauders, feeling exposed in nothing but the shorts he had used to swim.

His heart beat loudly in his ears as the bandits, tall, strong men with scars on their faces and arms, turned to focus on him, grinning viciously. Their leader walked out to meet him, his face full of scorn.

“You *are* your father’s child,” the bandit proclaimed, and Clay grit his teeth. “You see yourself as heroic, but you are really just a fool.”

*I’m sure my father will think so, too, once he has to pay to retrieve me,* Clay thought bitterly, but that thought dissolved into sudden panic as the bandit strung his bow with an arrow.

“And now you will answer for your father’s crimes,” the bandit said as he pulled the string back, aimed directly at Clay’s heart.

He had no time to react, no idea what to do, heard Sapnap and Bad shout in unison, and then –

And then, a great wind came rushing into the clearing, a wind that buffeted against the side of Clay’s head and practically threw him off his feet, a wind that knocked the bandit’s arrow away and sent it flying harmlessly into the forest.

The wind died down immediately, leaving the clearing in a second of stunned silence –

It was all Clay needed.

He launched himself at the bandit and wrenched the bow from his startled grasp, hitting him soundly over the head with the handle and wrenching a handful of arrows from his quiver. Rolling over, he fired three shots in quick succession, two of which hit their marks and sent bandits yelping and fleeing into the woods. An arrow whizzed narrowly over his head and he ducked, turned to see Sapnap and Bad finally out of the water and disarming the nearest bandits, handily sending them packing into the woods. He fired one more shot at the bandit’s last remaining archer, and then they were all fleeing, the whole lot of them.

“Don’t come back!” he shouted giddily into the woods as he watched their retreating backs, and Sapnap screamed “*YES! YES!*” while Bad just ran up to Clay babbling: “are you okay, Dream?! – we did it, we really did it, we won our first battle! – that wind was so lucky - I took that guy’s sword –,”

Clay held out an arm to stop Bad as he saw the leader of the bandits stir at his feet, sitting up to see three teenagers in their shorts holding bows and swords pointed directly at him.

The bandit glared up at Clay with hateful eyes. “Well then, Crown Prince,” he said through gritted teeth, “do it. As I would have done to you.”

Clay contemplated him with curiosity. “I don’t know what my father did to you to make you hate him like this,” he finally said, dropping his bow. “But that is not the kind of person I am.”

Somehow this only enraged the man more – he drew himself up, snarling: “if you don’t know what your father did to magic users in this country then you are an idiot as well as a tyrant –,”

It was the wrong thing to say. Clay suddenly felt his blood rush hot and loud in his ears, and he grabbed the bandit by the front of his shirt and wrenched him up, hissing, "So you're a friend of sorcery, is that it? I was about to let you walk away, but perhaps you've managed to change my mind."

"Do it," the man breathed back with a wild gleam in his eyes, not defending himself, barely resisting. "It would be an honor to die in the same way as my parents, as my family, so do it. Just —,"

And Clay almost did.

But he felt a hand fall on his shoulder, a warm, familiar hand that pulled him back until he was looking at George. George, with his serious, dark eyes, his face lined with concern.

"Dream," George said quietly. "You've won. Let him go."

The words pierced through the red haze of anger that had taken over his vision, and Dream took a breath, lowered his head in a short nod. He turned back to the bandit, still in his grasp, who looked back and forth from George to Dream in confusion and anger.

Dream dropped him in a heap, watching him cough and struggle to rise. "You will leave Camelot and never return if you know what's good for you," he said harshly, "because if I find you again, I will chase you out myself."

The bandit rose finally and began limping to the tree line, but took one look back at the group of four, and, inexplicably, began laughing. He cackled all the way into the forest, until his voice dropped out of range.

"Fucking weirdo," mumbled Sapnap while Bad just shook his head.

"Are you okay?" George asked Dream, and Dream nodded.

"He was a sorcerer," Dream said, and saw George's face go pale. "Or a friend of sorcerers."

"And we beat him," Bad said from his side, clasping his shoulder.

"Hell yes, we did," Sapnap, said, grabbing Dream's other shoulder. "We beat him in our *underwear*."

The four of them laughed in utter relief, standing on the edge of the lake for another long moment before Bad finally said, "okay, I'm officially done with this. Let's go home already."

As they got dressed and started to pack up for the walk home, Dream noticed that George still seemed off, was still quiet and reserved compared to his normal self. As Sapnap and Bad continued to dry off and grab their things, Dream pulled George to the side.

"Are you okay?" Dream asked quietly.

George's eyes went wide. "Y-yes," he said quickly, "yes, I'm fine."

"You just seem... weird, I don't know."

"Well, it's, yes, I mean, it's..." George gestured broadly to the lake, as though gesturing at the entire afternoon. "It's been a... a weird day."

“I think I get it,” Dream said, inspecting George’s expressions carefully.

“You do?” George asked nervously.

“George,” Dream said, clapping him on the shoulder, “just because you couldn’t fight today, doesn’t mean you weren’t helping us. I know that was probably pretty scary, but Sap and Bad and I... we’ve been training for this. And you don’t have to be a knight to be our friend, okay? I don’t want you to feel bad about that, or anything.”

George had a strange expression on his face, and he sighed deeply, nodding. “Okay. Thanks, Dream,” he finally said, crossing his arms. “It’s just... yeah. I guess I don’t like feeling helpless when you’re in danger.”

“Awww, Georgie cares about us after all,” Dream teased, messing up George’s hair just to hear him splutter angrily, like normal. “Anyway, you helped. You were like... moral support,” he grinned as George went red in embarrassment.

“Yeah, George is like our cheerleader,” joked Sapnap as the group finally started retracing their steps towards Camelot. Dream laughed while Bad hit Sapnap, telling him to ‘be nice,’ and they trudged towards the forest.

They didn’t see George stop for a moment longer on the beach. They didn’t see the long moment of silence in which George watched the bandit’s leader emerge quietly from the opposite tree line, pulling back a newly retrieved bow. They didn’t see the arrow whistle through the air, cutting a dangerous arc directly towards Dream’s back.

They didn’t see the arrow freeze, mid-air, and break in half, as George held up his arm steadily, making direct eye contact with the bandit himself. George dropped his arm, and the arrow dropped into the lake.

The bandit’s eyes were wide and dumbstruck as George stared him down, his face cold and determined. The trio disappeared into the forest.

And then George was gone, as well.

## Chapter End Notes

I wrote this entire chapter today, so.... more soon?

Comments = fuel <3

## fourteen

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### *fourteen*

Clay paced back and forth in his enormous room, nervously fidgeting every now and then with his hair, his tunic, and the crown that rested on his head. His room was large enough for him to pace, luckily; well, really, it was large enough for him to do almost anything he wanted. It was four times the size of a normal bedroom, with large windows on the eastern wall, a giant four-poster bed, a large table and desk, and enough room for him to sleep, eat, bathe, study, and nervously pace in all he liked.

There was to be an *event* tonight, an event that Clay had spent weeks preparing for. Camelot was hosting the kings and councils of every one of the Five Kingdoms. They were to be *here*, eating, talking, and strategizing, all in the Grand Hall.

Clay had paid enough attention in his history lessons to know that alliances were made and broken in the spaces of hours. And as his father had drilled into his head, he was to be absolutely perfect that night. So it had been etiquette classes, clothes fittings, and civics refreshers for days. He could probably recite the names and stations of every guest who would arrive that evening in his sleep.

Clay didn't care all that much about pomp and performance, or about his social status in the world of nobles. As the Prince, he didn't feel the strong need to jostle for friends who probably only cared about him because of his status. And he found those who enjoyed politics merely for the sake of politics somewhat disturbing. But he did care deeply about his kingdom's wellbeing, and the social politics that happened at these events had a direct impact on Camelot's ability to trade, to feed its citizens, and to defend itself.

For that reason, he felt a nervous apprehension as the dinner grew closer with every passing second. He was to be an ambassador for Camelot tonight, and one wrong word or action could throw his kingdom into jeopardy. He was no longer a child, and would be taken seriously in his father's court; an actor, not a bystander.

Clay felt anxiety start to swirl in his chest as he continued to pace, running his cues in his head over and over. His crown, which he rarely wore, seemed to grow heavier and heavier on his head.

A sudden tap at the window startled him and pulled him out of his anxious spiral. He looked at the short window closest to his bedside until the tap replicated. It was a pebble being thrown against the glass.

Failing to stifle a relieved grin, Clay rushed to open the window only to have another pebble strike him directly in the middle of his forehead.

"OH," George cried below, slapping a hand over his mouth. "Sorry, Dream!"

"You idiot," Dream laughed, rubbing his forehead and feeling a swell of relief to see his friend. "Are you trying to kill me?"

“More like trying to make sure you’re not already dead,” George shout-whispered, shuffling awkwardly on the ground. He was standing in the middle of the small garden that Clay’s north-facing window opened up into, looking just as out-of-place as ever. “Where have you been?”

Thinking back, Dream realized guiltily that he had probably dropped off the face of the Earth in George’s eyes, having been consumed by preparation for the dinner for the past week and a half, at least. Considering he and George saw each other nearly every day, he didn’t blame the other boy for being worried.

“I’m sorry. I should have told you,” Dream said, leaning on his elbows in the windowsill. “My father is hosting this enormous dinner tonight, and it’s very important. I’ve been totally consumed with getting ready for it.”

“Ah,” George said, nodding stiffly. “Explains the crown.”

“Oh,” Clay said, reaching up to touch it self-consciously. “Yeah.”

“Is that what happened to Sapnap and Bad, too?”

“Yeah, everyone in the castle has been busy,” Dream winced.

A moment of awkward silence passed before George said, “well, okay, good then. I guess I’ll leave you to it.”

“I’m sorry again for disappearing,” Dream said, feeling genuinely guilty for how lonely George looked by himself in the garden.

“Don’t apologize,” George said firmly, and Dream felt a rush of affection for how good of a sport his friend was being. “This is what a commoner like me gets for making friends with ye olde Crown Prince, eh?”

“I don’t remember saying we were friends,” Dream said with a smirk, and then ducked as another pebble flew into his window.

“Keep going and it’ll be a boulder,” George warned, his smile undermining the threat.

“George,” Dream called just as the other boy started to walk away, “how about tonight. After I’m done with everything – it’ll be late. We can meet by the stone pile?”

George turned around, brightening up, and nodded. “Okay! I’ll see you there.”

Clay closed the window just as Miriam opened up the double doors to his room.

“Prince Clay,” she said as she entered, only to shriek with alarm as he straightened and turned towards her. “By the – what happened to your forehead?!”

*Thanks, George,* Clay groaned internally as he was pulled towards a mirror until the little red spot left by the pebble was successfully rubbed into oblivion.

---

The Grand Hall had never looked grander, Clay thought, as he entered it alongside his father. The engraved wood and stone of the Hall was polished to sparkling, and enormous oak



tables spanned the length of the Hall so as to accommodate their dozens of guests. Through the vaulted windows, the evening sun cast bright, colorful hues over the entire assembly, the kings and nobles seated at their places as well as the servants who hurried back and forth with trays of food and goblets of ale.

The activity paused as a trumpeter announced the arrival of Clay and his father, and every guest rose in a great flurry of cloth as the King of Camelot approached his seat at the head of the great table.

“Honored guests,” the King spoke, his voice carrying to the furthest corners of the hall. Clay glanced at him nervously, feeling fortified just by his father’s presence. As terrifying as it was to be on his father’s bad side, it was equally relieving to feel protected by him. His father was formidable, severe-looking yet fair, his light hair and eyes matching Clay’s. His body was lined and hardened, evidence of the many wars he had fought and won. The respect he commanded reverberated throughout the silent hall as the kings and council members of the other kingdoms attended closely to his words.

“We are honored to host you in Camelot tonight,” King Daniel said. “Our kingdom has been blessed with abundance, which we hope to share with you, our friends and allies. Please, eat, drink, and be well. I hope to speak to each of you in turn tonight.”

With that, he took his seat, and everyone sat down alongside him, the hall erupting into a low murmur of conversation.

Clay sat to the left of his father and was immediately provided with a plate full of food and a goblet of wine. He picked up his fork hesitantly, suddenly overwhelmed with the feeling that every eye in the room was trained on him.

“You are old enough now to speak to these men as equals, Clay,” his father said, and Clay turned to the King quickly. His father looked at him seriously, and Clay shivered with the weight of his gaze. “You should do so, even if they attempt to treat you as a child.”

Clay nodded and drew himself up where he sat.

Throughout the night, several men approached the head of the table, taking their turns to speak to the King and make their various reports, offers and requests. Clay watched carefully as his father discussed and dispatched each conversation in turn, noting with interest how he never let a man leave feeling spurned, but made clear his intentions to those he was truly interested in dealing with. Clay’s father was a master of social politics, and Clay sat enraptured, soaking up everything he could learn.

At one point, Clay was introduced to Prince Andrew, an arrogant, self-aggrandizing fellow about his age who talked his ear off at length about the various shortcomings of Camelot’s castle.

“The mutton here is really quite nice, we don’t get it half as nice in Essetir... but I have to say I’m disappointed with the wine, I thought it’d be a bit sweeter? You should really try the wine from Essetir, our winemakers really know how to get a man drunk... I had to fire my useless manservant the other day for drinking too much of it on the job! You understand how that goes, I’m sure, it’s hard to find a decent manservant these days...”

“I don’t keep a manservant,” Clay managed to jump in during Andrew’s brief pause for breath, smiling politely and attempting the kind of patient diplomacy his father was displaying to his right.

Andrew gawked at him and then shrugged. "I suppose you are a bit young," he said loftily. "You'll get one soon, I'm sure, it's only customary, and heavens, the time you save, on chores and cleaning armor and what not.... actually, if your Highness would allow me to offer some advice?"

Clay dipped his head, taking a sip of wine to hide the way his lips had thinned in annoyance.

"Make sure your servants know you can use the stick as well as the carrot, eh?" Andrew said, raising his eyebrows conspiratorially. "Nothing like a bit of roughing up to get something through a thick skull, you know what I mean?" he chuckled, downing the last of his goblet.

The suggestion was so abrasive to Clay that he had to struggle for a moment not to raise his voice. "That is not how we treat our servants in Camelot," he finally managed, unable to keep the disgust out of his tone.

Andrew looked taken aback, but tried to shrug it off. Soon, though, he finally picked up on Clay's unhappy expression and took his leave.

There was no quicker way to lose Clay's respect than to say such a thing, he thought as he picked angrily at his food. As though it weren't enough to order your servants around day and night, lording your superior wealth and power over them at every turn; but to also find it necessary to *abuse* them? Nothing could go more against the purpose of royalty, in Clay's view, which was to serve and protect the people of Camelot, and especially those within the castle walls. He tried to stop himself from stewing over the conversation for the rest of the night, but Prince Andrew had firmly embedded himself as the worst kind of nobility in his mind.

Near the end of the night, as well-fed and slightly drunk guests began to slowly filter out for their various chambers, King Daniel and Prince Clay were approached by a tall, broad-shouldered man with a dark beard and hair which fell past his shoulders. Clay identified him as King William of Mercia, one of the five major kingdoms in Albion, and perhaps the most powerful next to Camelot.

William spoke quickly and fluidly, with a style that put Clay off nearly immediately. It felt as though William was constantly trying to pass something by without their noticing, a suspicion which immediately felt true as William said:

"... and we've been mightily successful with our crops this year, and would be happy to strike a trade agreement, King Daniel, if you find yourself short this winter. Our newly operational magic guild has ensured that our crops stay free from blight and locusts, and we feel confident..."

The background noise seemed to grind to a halt, and Clay narrowed in on the words William had just spoken, wondering if he had perhaps misheard. He felt his father doing the same thing as Daniel leaned forward, placing his hands flat on the table.

"Excuse me, William," Daniel said, and the timbre of his voice would be enough to send many lesser men running. "Did you just speak of sorcerers in your kingdom?"

William hesitated as some of his council members glanced at him nervously. "Daniel," he said in a saccharine, placating tone. "I know of your... *distrust* of sorcery, but you should know that magic can be used for any number of things, as a tool, for good or for -,"

"And you've brought them into your government?" Daniel interrupted, his voice as cold as ice.

William faltered again, but drew himself up. “Yes, Daniel,” he said, “and I don’t regret it either. Like I said, our crops have –,”

“I certainly hope, William,” Daniel said, and Clay felt certain that the same wave of anger he was starting to feel in his own chest was rising in his father’s, too, “that you have not actually *brought* one of these sorcerers into my kingdom today.”

At this, William’s advisors truly started to devolve into nervous chatter, backing away from the table and trying to whisper in William’s ear while he stayed still, narrowing his eyes at Daniel.

That was answer enough. Clay felt himself standing only to realize that his father was standing as well, booming, “leave this castle immediately. As long as sorcerers hold power in your government, William, Camelot will never be open to you, not for trade or for protection. The choice is yours.”

William tried once more to hold up his hands, venturing, “come now, Daniel-,”

“He said leave,” Clay shouted this time, and he drew his sword. With pleasant surprise, he heard his father’s knights, who sat on all sides of them, follow his lead as they drew their weapons alongside him.

The motion shocked William, who stared at Clay in astonishment, but it worked. Narrowing his gaze, William turned with a billowing of his cloak, followed by his council of advisors as he took his leave of the Great Hall.

Clay’s heart pounded in his ears as he sheathed his sword and sat again at the table. His father’s hand rested briefly on his shoulder, and he glanced at Daniel, his heart leaping to see a hint of pride in his eyes.

“You did well, Clay,” the King said solemnly as he waved for the rest of the festivities to continue. “There is no room whatsoever for sorcery in any honest government. You give them an inch, and they will take root before you have a chance at stopping them. That includes forging alliances with them.”

“I know, father,” Clay responded, meeting his gaze. “I will *never* let that happen to Camelot.”

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Clay was practically falling over his own feet in exhaustion by the time he was permitted to return to his chambers, but he remembered his promise to George, and after changing and grabbing a few items from the kitchens, he made his way across the castle grounds, illuminated by moonlight and the dying torches flickering in the castle windows.

The pile of flat stones in the quiet grove of trees was lit up by the moon so that they almost glowed, and as Clay grew closer, he could see the slight figure sitting cross-legged at the top of the pile.

“Miss me?” he called as he climbed up the stones, and saw George leap to his feet.

“Dream!” George said, grinning. “About time.”

“Have you been waiting long?” Dream asked with a yawn, collapsing onto his back on the top of the highest rock. George said no, he hadn’t, and Dream didn’t have enough energy to tell whether or not he was lying.

“Brought you food,” he mumbled, holding out the cloth bag he had lugged all the way from the kitchen. George would never ask for Dream to bring him food, but he always looked slightly starving, just a little malnourished, and Dream liked to do it. Tonight, George started immediately digging in, letting out little noises of delight at the food items considered delicacies even for nobles: spiced mutton, sweet cakes and all kinds of fruits, figs and nuts.

“Is this how you dickheads eat all the time?” George asked through a full mouth, and after a full night of etiquette and manicured politeness, the brashness of the question was such a relief that Dream wheezed with laughter over something that was not all that funny.

“I’m serious,” George said, his voice muffled, but laughed along with him. The moonlight illuminated him softly, bringing out the angles and shadows of his face. Dream felt overcome by fondness for him, and for the fact that he could just sprawl out on the rock in front of him instead of having to appear poised and proper at every moment.

“No, not all the time,” Dream responded. “Tonight was a special occasion.” Full to the brim of thoughts from the night, he started launching into a full account of everything that had happened while George kept eating. He talked about the various kings and nobles he had met, mentioned what an asshole Prince Andrew had been, and gave a play-by-play of his confrontation with King William. His story of seeing Sapnap accidentally spill his goblet all over the ground made George snort with amusement.

By the time he had finished rambling, though, he noticed George looked a little conflicted. He was staring down at his hands as he turned an apple over and over in his palms.

“What’s wrong?” Dream asked, folding his hands over his chest and turning his head to look at George.

“It’s nothing,” George said guiltily, and Dream raised his eyebrows.

“You *know* I can see right through you,” he said, and George laughed and rolled his eyes.

“I don’t know, Dream. It’s... you know I have no idea what you’re talking about, right?”

“What do you mean?” Dream asked, propping himself up on his elbows.

“You and Sapnap and Bad, you all belong to this totally different world,” George rushed, and by the quickness of his words Dream realized he had probably thought this conversation over before. “And of course I don’t blame you for it, it’s who you are. But we’re getting older, and I just – I guess I don’t know how I fit in here. It was one thing when we were kids, but everything is changing now, and I just... I dunno.” He kept turning the apple nervously in his hands, refusing to look at Dream.

*Oh.* Dream sat up all the way, crossing his legs as he felt his heart sink. “I understand, George,” he said. “I know it can’t be easy being friends with me, when I’m... with everything. If you don’t want to come around anymore,” and wow, this was really hard – “then I understand.”

“No,” George said in frustration, “that’s – that’s not what I’m saying at all!” He hit his forehead with the heel of his palm in exasperation.

Dream was confused. “Then what are you saying?”

“Dream, you’re literally the Prince of Camelot and I’m just some random commoner,” George said, gesturing emphatically. “You’re *so* important and I am so... *not*. I’m just saying, you don’t have to waste your time with me if you don’t want to, okay? I’ll be fine,” he ended on an entirely unconvincing note.

OH. “George, you really are an idiot,” Dream said, shaking his head in exasperation.

George’s face went red and he crossed his arms. “Why? Tell me why I’m an idiot.”

“I like you *because* you aren’t like me,” Dream practically shouted, though not angrily. “George, you’re the only person I know who doesn’t treat me like I’m some perfect royal poster child. You’re honest with me and you don’t let me win at anything. Even though I usually win anyway.”

“Hey,” George protested.

“I’m just *saying*,” Dream continued, leaning over and poking him in the arm. “We’re friends, George, real friends. I’m not letting the fact that we’re *different* get in the way.” He felt almost embarrassed by the soft sincerity in his voice, but chose to commit to the sentiment.

“Okay,” George mumbled, but he still looked hesitant. “Well, that’s easy enough to say now, but what happens when events like this become more common? You’re going to be King someday, Dream, you think you’ll still have time then to come hang out with me in – in the woods, or whatever?”

A small grin started to spread across Dream’s face. “Actually...” he said thoughtfully, “I might have a solution for that...”

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“A manservant?” said Clay’s father and George’s grandmother incredulously, unknowingly speaking in unison from opposite sides of the castle walls.

“Yes,” Clay and George spoke back, both forcing themselves not to shrink under the respective gazes of their guardians.

“And you have someone specifically in mind?” King Daniel said from his throne, leaning forward wearily. He looked tired from the previous night’s festivities, but maintained his normal regal demeanor.

“Yes,” Clay repeated, standing as tall as he could. “My friend George, the healer Sylvia’s grandson. He’s --”

“—my best friend, and I’d be there to help him,” George said, sitting across from his grandmother at their well-worn kitchen table. “I would live within the castle walls, and I could send money back. I’d be able to go to school.”

She hummed thoughtfully as she crushed the herbs he had collected that day into a paste. “You understand this is no small decision,” she said, without looking at him. “Being aide to the prince is not the same as being his friend. You’ll be his servant, you’ll have to do the chores he gives you --”

“—without complaint,” the King continued. “He’ll have to learn to tend to the horses, to mend armor. He must be prompt and helpful, or else he won’t be worth the cost. We have others in the castle already who could take this role, others who are already familiar with the necessary duties...”

“George is a hard worker,” Clay said honestly. “He’s always helped his grandmother with her practice, as long as I’ve known him. And he’s smart, too --”

“—and kind. He doesn’t mistreat his servants, he’s always been good to me, and to us. I know I’ll have to work hard, but it’s not like I’ll be a slave. It’s like -- Clay said he wants me to be like his advisor,” George tried to explain, hiding his nervously trembling hands underneath the table. “I’d be with him all the time, and he trusts my opinions.”

His grandmother finally set down her mortar and pestle and looked up at George. Her face was lined and serious, her dark eyes as perceptive and caring as ever. “And what about your gift, George?” she asked quietly, and George’s hands went still. “You understand the danger—”

“—of bringing someone into your life in that way? A manservant is more than an errand boy, Clay. He is someone you trust with your most private moments. He’ll know —”

“—almost everything about you. And that is something that is uniquely dangerous for you in that castle, George. If he were to discover—”

“—secrets pertaining to our kingdom, and if he were a traitor, there’s no telling the damage he could do. I say this not to cast doubts on the boy’s character, but to remind you—”

“—what is at stake. I know you must have thought about this. But I have to ask you, George:”

And the two guardians, speaking across the borders of distance, class, and circumstance, asked their children: “do you trust him?”

And George and Clay looked up with confidence, and they both said, “yes.”

---

But here, their paths diverged. Because as Clay left his father’s throne room in high spirits, his goal achieved, George’s grandmother kept him in his seat with a long, hard look.

“There’s something else, isn’t there?” she asked.

The words felt as though they pierced George through the sternum. His gran could always see right through him. It had always been that way.

The flame in their fireplace was dying out slowly, and she tilted her head towards it questioningly. Grateful for the distraction, George held out his hand and slowly coaxed the fire back to life with his magic, helping it lick up new kindling. He dropped his hand, satisfied, as the fire roared into a healthy blaze. Even performing simple spells always left him feeling warm and confident in a way only magic could.

His gran watched with a soft expression. “You won’t be able to do that in the castle. Ever.”

“I know,” George said with a twist in his gut.

“You know that I’ll be fine here, Georgie,” Sylvia continued as she started to sweep up the dried herbs that had fallen onto the table. “I knew you would leave this house at some point to follow your own path. But is this really the life you want? A life led in secrecy? The castle may have its comforts, but it is not an easy task – to hide who you really are.”

George sat in silence as his grandmother continued her tasks without hurry, the fire’s slow burn filling the air with orange light and soft crackles. She was always so patient, always waiting for him to find the right words before he spoke.

Finally, he said, “it’s hard to explain.”

She hummed. “Just try.”

“It’s something about Dream.”

At this, his grandmother paused her motions and looked up at him sharply. “Who is Dream?”

“Oh,” George said, feeling his face burn. “I meant Clay.”

She put her hands down slowly. “You call him Dream?”

“Yeah, it’s dumb. It’s a nickname, I guess, uhm... since we were kids,” George said, suddenly confused. “Why does that matter?”

She looked surprised, actually surprised, an incredibly rare emotion for her that he hadn’t seen even when he started conjuring sparks from his fingers as a child. But it was only for a moment, and she masked it well, though he noted how she leaned forward onto the table, paying even closer attention than she had before. “It’s nothing. Just... say what you were going to say.”

“I don’t really know what I was going to say, or at least what I want to say doesn’t make any sense,” George acknowledged, but kept talking, opening up the hatch to the crowd of confusing thoughts that had been rummaging about in his head for months. “There’s just something special about him. And I know how stupid that sounds because obviously he’s special, he’s the Prince. But I mean something else. I... I just get this feeling.”

His grandmother was silent. He actually felt unnerved by how closely she was paying attention to him.

“I really feel like he might allow magic to return to Camelot,” George rushed.

“You said Prince Clay hates magic,” his grandmother said immediately.

“He does, which is why it doesn’t make any sense,” George said, burning red again and burying his head in his hands in frustration. “Ugh, I can’t speak.”

“You’re doing fine, George, just fine,” she said, patting the top of his head kindly. “What you’re saying is very interesting to me. I want you to keep going.”

After a long moment, George lifted his head again. “He does hate magic, I mean *really* hates it. And – and there are even some times I feel afraid of him. And yet I feel... I feel drawn to him,” he finally mumbled, feeling embarrassed by the words. “I want to protect him. And when I ask myself *why* I feel that way, beyond the fact that he’s my closest friend, the other answer I find

is... because he's going to be King someday. And... he's going to bring magic back to Camelot. I don't know why I think this, but I do."

His grandmother was very still, and very quiet.

"What does it mean, Gran?" George asked, feeling very unnerved.

In place of an answer, she rose and walked towards her bookshelf, mumbling something under her breath. The book she pulled down from the shelf was well-worn and almost impossibly old, the leather cover scratched and water-marked, yet fully intact. George couldn't read the letters on the cover, as they were written in the alphabet of the Old Language, but his grandmother could, and she flipped quickly to a well-marked page of the manuscript, where she ran a finger down the page until she found what she was looking for. As she read, she shook her head and a laugh escaped her mouth.

"I should have known," she muttered, a weird grin on her face.

"Gran, you're sort of freaking me out," George said nervously.

She looked up at him and her eyes were *sparkling*. George was actually taken aback as she said, "Georgie, I think you're right. I think you're right about everything."

"...what are you talking about?" he asked incredulously as she placed the book in front of him. From the Old Language lessons she had managed to fit in during the few free hours of their days, he could make out some of the words, but the rest dissolved into unintelligible scribbles in his eyes. His grandmother pointed at one passage, where George could make out exactly one word: *dream*.

"This is a book of prophecies," his grandmother said as George strained to make out the surrounding words, "that witches and wizards across Albion have clung to for decades. For years, we've been hunted down and burned in every kingdom, not just Camelot. And for years, we've been trying to understand the meaning of this prophecy. The dream of Camelot."

"The dream of Camelot?" George repeated numbly. His head was spinning.

"We all – we all gave it a literal interpretation," his grandmother babbled, laughing again and hitting her forehead with her palm. "You should have heard the council meetings, every single time some Camelotian mage with recurring nightmares came in claiming to understand the key to balance..."

"Gran, I don't understand what you're saying and I can't read this," George interrupted in frustration, pushing the book across the table. "*Explain*."

As though remembering her surroundings, Sylvia took a deep breath and collected herself, taking the book back and inspecting it once more with a wry smile still on her lips. "In the darkest age," she read aloud, "the dream of Camelot will restore balance to Albion."

Then she raised her palms in the air. "That's it. You can understand how there would be confusion."

"Yes, I am very confused," George half-shouted in exasperation.

"Bringing balance to Albion – uniting all of the Five Kingdoms – we've known for decades that it's the only way magic can be restored to the land," his grandmother forged on, standing and pacing as she explained. "Until Albion lives in peace, magic will always be used as a tool of war,



and will always be scorned and punished by those who lack it. It's a story as old as the land itself, George. And this -," and here she pointed again at the book, "this is what we've been waiting for."

The gears in George's head were turning at last, and he stared at the page in a sort of shell-shocked state. "And... and you think this book is talking about *Dream? My Dream?*" *Weird, goofy idiot Dream?* he thought - but just as quickly thought about Dream's constant bravery, his natural fairness towards others, his easy strength and talent, and realized with a start that, yes, he could picture it. He could picture Dream as an incredible leader.

His grandmother returned to the book, where she scanned it again. "This page also talks about a powerful sorcerer who will help lead a King of Camelot to greatness. You have to understand," she chuckled, running a hand through her hair, "prophecies like that are almost a dime a dozen, but now, in context, George... this could be about you."

"Gran, that doesn't make any sense," George said, pushing up from the table finally. "I am not a *powerful sorcerer*. I can barely lift pebbles higher than a foot, and you remember that time I caught my eyebrows on fire? The best thing I've ever done was that wind I summoned last year, with the bandits, and - and I don't even know how I did that! I haven't done it since! It's - this can't be talking about me, Gran, it just can't. I'm not -,"

His grandmother grabbed him gently but firmly by the shoulders, breaking him out of his anxious spiral. He looked at her, and in the light of the fire which still blazed brightly in the furnace, he saw something he hadn't seen before. Beyond the wrinkled lines and gray hair of his grandmother, a light was flaring in her eyes, a kind of wildness as she drew herself up proudly. He saw Sylvia for the witch she was, and shivered.

"George," she said calmly. "Summon a flame in your hand."

George swallowed and did so, opening his palm until a small flicker of fire appeared and danced in his hand.

"Good," she said, and then held up her own hand. "**Forbearnan**," she whispered in the Old Language to her palm, as George had seen her do a hundred times, lighting an identical flame which she held up to compare to George's. George stared at their hands, enraptured.

"There," she said, "equal. Now, tell me, George. Why didn't you speak?"

George was pulled out of his thoughts. "What?"

"You didn't cast a spell," his grandmother said, raising her eyebrows. "How did you conjure the flame?"

"I dunno," George said, suddenly feeling foolish that he had never noticed the difference before. He rolled the flame around absently from hand to hand. "Just did it."

"*Exactly*, George, *exactly*," his gran said, snuffing out her flame as she grabbed George's hands. "You're an elemental wizard, George. Most people have to learn magic, but you were born with it. It was the same way with your mother," and now the pride was evident in her voice, and George swallowed back a lump in his throat. "She was wildly gifted, even as a child. From the minute you started lighting your own candles as a child, I knew you had inherited her gift," she chuckled, her eyes shining. "And now I see you have something even greater written into your destiny."

"I'm supposed to help Dream," George said numbly, before she could say it for him. It was

something he already knew to be true, but it was still bizarre to hear the words come out of his mouth. “I’m supposed to protect him.”

“You knew it even before I did, and that’s saying something.” His gran dropped his hands and returned to the book. “Nothing is set in stone, George, especially not the future,” she murmured. “Dream – Prince Clay – he has to live long enough to become king. And he has to change his mind about magic, as well. Otherwise, our people will forever remain in persecution.”

Poor George looked like he might have a stroke. He sat down heavily in his chair, burying his head in his hands and groaning. A few seconds later, he felt his gran combing through his hair with her hand like she always did when he felt overwhelmed, and he relaxed into the comforting touch.

“One thing at a time, George,” she said softly. “The most important thing you can do right now is to keep being Prince Clay’s friend. You two were drawn to each other, even as children. You can trust that bond.”

“You don’t know the way he talks about sorcerers,” George mumbled, feeling his heart sink even at the thought. “If I told him I have magic... I’d never see him again, or worse, he’d throw me in the dungeons.”

“No, you can’t tell him yet,” his gran mused. “It will take time.”

“So you want me to lie to him?” George asked, feeling his stomach churn. Somehow, that felt even worse than facing the dungeons.

“You’re protecting yourself, and further, you’re protecting *him*. Remember what you told me about the bandits? Do you think it was an accident you were there to save him?”

George sighed deeply. “I guess not.”

“You need to be there to protect him. It’s fated. The fact that he can’t tolerate magic... that’s his shortcoming, not yours,” his grandmother said. “The quest to help Clay become King, to help him unite Albion, and to save our people from the pyre... these are all incredibly noble aims, George. You have a difficult road ahead of you. But I have faith.”

“You don’t know how stubborn Clay can be,” George said, and they both dissolved into giggles.

His grandmother pulled him into a hug. “I’ll miss you. You’ll visit often?”

“All the time,” he promised, hugging her tightly.

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The next morning, George was once again trudging across the castle grounds, this time carrying all of his possessions in a small bag on his back. The sunrise set the castle aflame as he neared it, and he paused on the lawn for a moment to appreciate the sight, for the last time, as an outsider.

And then he saw Clay open the side door for him and wave at him with a wide grin, and George smiled back. And he walked steadily towards his destiny.

## Chapter End Notes

please don't expect updates this often, I just have the writing bug right now lol.  
actually can't believe i did 12,000 words in 2 days :o

sidenote why is "manservant" the word they use in merlin and SEEMS to be the  
closest word there is to the specific \*kind\* of servant i'm talking about but is also....  
the worst word in the english language...

thank you so so much for all the nice comments on chapter one, they were such great  
motivators!!

## sixteen, pt. 1

### Chapter Notes

catch the updated tags! as a warning, this chapter contains more graphic depictions of violence than previous chapters have, and this level of violence will be consistent for the rest of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### *sixteen*

The noon sun beat down mercilessly on top of George's head. Stuffed inside of a suit of second-hand armor, he felt like a chicken roasting in a metal pot. His heart hammered in his chest as he readjusted his grip on the unwieldy sword in his right hand, hoisting a heavy shield in his left.

Several yards in front of him stood his opponent, covered from head to toe in finely-made chainmail and iron armor. His sword glinted dangerously in the sunlight.

On all sides of them stretched an enormous, empty field, the grass scorched and yellow from the summer heat. There was nobody else in sight. Crickets and cicadas whirled loudly from the grass and trees nearby, and George thought bitterly that they would be the only witnesses to the travesty that was about to unfold.

"Defend yourself or die!" his opponent roared, his voice muffled through the helmet.

George grit his teeth and widened his stance. "Come on then," he yelled back, cursing himself as he heard his voice waver, and waited for the inevitable.

All at once, his opponent raised his sword and rushed him, moving fluidly, as though the weight of his armor meant nothing at all. George heaved his shield up in a last-minute block of his opponent's first strike and swung his sword in a wide arc his opponent easily parried, shoving him backwards. His opponent struck him once more on the shield, then lunged for his right side; George managed to bring his sword up in a block, but the impact knocked him back a half-step so that he wobbled for a second, off-balance.

Seizing the moment, his opponent feinted to the right and then brought his full weight against the shield that George tried to bring cross-body to block the blow, successfully knocking him onto the ground. George hit the earth with an *oof*, the heaviness of the armor worsening the impact, and brought his shield up against another strike of the sword. Frantically, George tried to swing his weapon from the ground, but the other man kicked it from his hand.

George's attacker planted a foot on his chest, swung his sword in an arc and aimed the point at George's heart, and for a moment, George felt his magic instinctively spark to life in his hands, showing him everything he could do to defend himself: *twist his arm, knock him back, let the earth swallow him whole...*

"Do you yield?" came the metallic voice and George closed his fist, stifling his magic and letting his head fall back in annoyance.

"Alright, fine, I get it already," he shouted in exasperation, "will you let me up, *please?*"

Rather than remove his foot, his attacker brought his hand up to remove his helmet and threw it to the side. Prince Clay grinned down at his servant, sweat lining his brow and plastering his hair to his forehead. "Come on, George, it's no fun if you don't yield," he said, his eyes glinting mischievously.

"Are you kidding me, Dream?" George groaned, but Dream didn't move his foot, raising an eyebrow in expectation. "I yield, I freaking yield, you dolt, get off me!"

Dream chuckled and stepped back and George pulled himself up from the ground with as much dignity as he could muster. "This is servant abuse, you know," George grumbled, tearing his own helmet off.

"Hey, you agreed to come out here with me," Dream reminded him, and George sighed because it was true. An afternoon spent training with Dream beat sitting around the castle mending tunics any day, no matter how many bruises he ended up with afterwards.

Dream returned to his initial position and turned again, sword in hand. "Okay, one more round. Best out of five."

"Dream, come on," George complained. "We've been out here for hours."

"I have to train, George! Do you *want* me to fail at the Tournament?"

"If you actually wanted to train, you should have found Sapnap," George retorted, throwing down his shield. "At this point, you're just beating me to make yourself feel better."

At this, Dream looked sort of guilty. "I told you, Sap was busy," he said in defense, but he dropped his stance. "We *have* been out here for a while. We should probably head back."

"What a great idea, where'd you get it?" George said sarcastically, earning him a punch in the shoulder that rattled his armor.

Their horses had drifted across the wide field they had chosen to practice in, and as George and Dream started trudging their way across it, George snuck a glance at his friend. Though they had both grown taller, Dream maintained his nearly half a foot-high lead, to George's great chagrin. His constant training had filled him out so that he was strong and moved capably in his heavy armor. But he was still young, and in the way he looked down in his feet as they walked, George could sense anxiety about the upcoming competition Dream had spent months practicing for.

"You're not nervous about the Tournament, are you, Dream?" George said, and then immediately regretted the way he phrased it as Dream looked sharply at him, put on the defensive.

"Of course not," he snapped. "Don't be stupid."

George raised his palms. "Sheesh, sorry."

After a pause, Dream sighed. "No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't snap. I'm just..." he trailed off.

"...nervous about the tournament?" George finished dryly, and Dream rolled his eyes but shrugged his shoulders once.

"I guess," he said as they reached their horses. Dream grabbed his horse by the reins and started packing away his things without much fanfare, but George had to take his horse by the halter and coo to her a bit at first, saying "had a good afternoon, did we, Daisy? Ready for a nice ride back, yes you are..."

Dream *really* rolled his eyes at this. "You named your horse *Daisy*?"

"Well, what's yours named?" George asked as he brushed some twigs away from Daisy's mane. She was a gray speckled mare who he loved very dearly, and who secretly got a forbidden apple from the kitchens every now and again.

"He doesn't *have* a name, he's a *horse*," Dream replied, planting his right foot in its stirrup and swinging himself up onto the saddle with ease. "Giving him a name would be demeaning." His horse, a black stallion with a white stripe down his front, whinnied and dipped his head as though in agreement.

"You just don't understand animals," George said dismissively as he clambered on top of Daisy. Dream laughed at this as though George had made a joke, but George secretly believed it to be true. He patted Daisy as they started walking and she snorted (happily, in George's opinion).

"Maybe shoveling their poop all day gives a man a better appreciation for them," Dream joked and George glared at the back of his head.

They started the ride back, retracing their steps through the worn path in the forest. George was grateful for the shade the woods provided, the great oaks and maple trees stretching overhead and relieving some of the summer heat. He was still in his armor and felt stifled by it. He spent considerable parts of his day cleaning armor, but never had a reason to wear it unless Dream pulled him along for one of his little training sessions. Riding a horse with armor on was a distinctly unpleasant experience.

Dream looked unfazed, as usual, looking just as comfortable in full armor as he did in his night clothes every evening. Noting this while looking at the prince's back led George to return to their previous conversation.

"You know you're literally going to win the Tournament, though, right?" he said as he urged Daisy on a little faster so that he and Dream were riding side by side. "You'll be great, like you always are."

Dream glanced at him but then looked away with a sigh. "Maybe," he said.

Though there was clearly something bothering Dream he wasn't saying, George basically understood his worry. Next week's tournament was nothing like the monthly jousts held for fun by the Camelot court, which Dream had won several times. The Tournament, capitalized, was held once every five years, and it invited competitors, and crowds, from across Albion. Participants were placed through a series of grueling events designed to test their strength, skill, and bravery, and everyone participated with exactly one goal in mind: to secure an invitation to join the Knights of Camelot. At the end of the Tournament, King Daniel would stand in front of the entire crowd

and announce the names of the men he was most impressed with to invite them to join the Knights. He could choose as many or as few as he liked. Rumor had it that one year, he did not accept a single contestant, and the entire population went home disappointed.

Though Dream had been in training to join the Knights since the day he was born, this year was the first he was old enough to participate – to officially earn a seat as a knight in his father's court. And it had been his sole, obsessive focus for months. As it grew closer and closer with each passing day, Dream had become even more laser-focused and slightly neurotic.

"Dream," George said as he ducked under a particularly low-hanging branch, "even if you don't win an invitation tomorrow, your father will make you a knight as soon as you turn eighteen. It's not the end of the world."

"Yeah, I know," Dream said dismissively, but he didn't seem comforted. "Hey, you think I can make that jump?" he asked suddenly, pointing at a large ditch in the road, which they had skirted on their way out.

"No," George said immediately. The ditch was practically twice the size of an average jump. "Absolutely not."

"I think I can," Dream said, and suddenly dug his heels into the side of his horse, shouting "yah!" and snapping his reins. His horse whinnied and took off in a gallop, leaving George to watch in terror as Dream and his horse barreled recklessly towards the gap.

"He's not gonna make it," George mumbled under his breath, and as Dream's horse neared the gap, he took in a breath and held out his hand, summoning wind.

A small ball of wind appeared behind Dream's horse, and as it launched itself up from the earth, George pushed it forward with as much force as he could muster without it becoming suspicious. He could feel it push them along a few inches at least, but even then, Dream's horse faltered at the opposite edge, his hind legs only barely finding purchase in the soft soil.

Dream whooped obliviously and threw a fist in the air. "Good horsey!" he yelled, patting his horse on the flank, who George thought looked distinctly windblown and confused.

"So you *did* give your horse a name," George said as he and Daisy climbed carefully around the ditch.

"What, horsey? That's not a name," Dream argued, narrowing his eyes.

"Well, it's not a word," George said with a grin.

"You're just mad cause we proved you wrong," Dream said, patting Horsey again and turning away haughtily. "I keep telling you not to doubt me, George."

George rolled his eyes behind his back and they forged on.

They filled their ride with easy, mindless chatter as they continued on the long road home. They took long rides like this every now and then, whenever George had finished with his chores and Dream wanted company, and they knew the sights and sounds of the Camelot countryside quite well.

Which is why they both fell silent as they started to pick up on something that sounded very, very wrong.

“Do you hear that?” George said finally and Dream nodded immediately, picking up his reins and urging his horse into a trot. George followed close behind, and they rode towards a nearby hill, towards the sounds of shouts and crashes that were growing ever-louder.

“It’s that village,” George realized suddenly, “that village we saw on the way here,” and Dream didn’t respond, just urged his horse on a little bit faster until they finally crested the hill and saw it for themselves.

The village, no more than a dozen houses and a few acres of farmland in the middle of a large meadow, was burning. The villagers ran from their homes, shouting in panic, as various men dressed in dark garments barged into house after house, leaving laden with food, weapons and other valuables.

“Pillagers,” Dream muttered and George went pale. Pillagers, the name commoners had assigned to dangerous, organized groups of thieves, had been increasing in number in recent months, and the wreckage they left behind was always horrible: innocent people murdered in cold blood, children left orphaned, whole villages pillaged and burned to the ground. And for no reason, it seemed, other than the scant amount of money they could rip from common people.

Suddenly, George realized Dream was grabbing his sword and gave a start. “What exactly do you think you’re doing?” he asked, his voice rising in pitch.

“I’m helping the villagers,” Dream said shortly, putting on his helmet.

“*Dream*,” George said, panic rising in his chest, “there’s a dozen of them, at least! We can’t just --,”

“George, what else do you want to do? Ride away and leave them here?” Dream shouted, turning towards him, and George could actually *feel* the glare even through the helmet. “These are Camelot citizens, and I’m helping them!”

And then Dream lashed his horse’s reins and took off into the village in a gallop.

“Son of a --,” George threw his head back and bit back a scream. “Why does he make everything so *difficult*?”

Then he swung off of Daisy and grabbed his sword and shield, running in after him.

By the time he reached the village, Dream had already cut down a few pillagers from his perch on his horse and was clashing with another who held a broadsword. George swiveled his head from left to right, looking for a way to help, until he noticed a woman screaming at her burning house. He ran to her side.

“My baby,” she said, and George heard a sharp, piercing cry from inside, and yep, that would do it. George dropped his things and ran into the burning building.

The smoke immediately stung his eyes and burned his throat, but he forged on, searching for the source of the cries. He reached a room on the second floor and found a makeshift wooden crib, where a toddler stood and screamed, tears streaking through the ash on his cheeks.

“Come here,” George said, rushing to grab the child in his arms. “That’s it. You’re okay.”

Suddenly, he heard a great creak coming from above him, and looked up just in time to see a burning ceiling beam come loose from its bearings and hurtle directly towards them.



The baby screamed as George instinctively threw a hand in the air over them, holding the beam up with a surge of magic. Shaking, he slowly let the beam tip over so it crashed into the floor next to them, gasping for air as he dropped it.

The baby stared at him with wide eyes and an open mouth.

“Let’s keep that between you and me, eh?” George said hoarsely before hearing another creak from the ceiling and making a dash for the door.

After depositing the baby with his tearful mother, George scanned the village for signs of Dream, and found him on the other side of the small village, holding off three pillagers at once. Horsey was gone, and Dream’s helmet had somehow fallen off at some point, but he was grinning maniacally, parrying and dodging blows like he was the lead in some sort of psychotic dance. When one of the pillager’s swords glanced off Dream’s armor just a little too closely, George’s heart caught in his throat, and he scrambled for his sword and shield, racing to reach him and help.

But a dozen yards or so away from Dream, he was intercepted by a pillager who rose from the smoke of a nearby building like some kind of phantom apparition – an apparition with a very real, very deadly sword, which he swung at George’s head like had had been born to decapitate him. George pulled his sword up and blocked the blow, feeling the shock waves travel down his arms, and realizing with panic that maybe he should have paid more attention during his training with Dream.

“George!?” he heard Dream shout, and unwilling to distract him, George shouted back, “I got it!”

The pillager leered at him. He had a tattooed mark around his right eye that made it look slightly larger than his left, and it gave him a deranged look as he lunged at George again and again. To George’s credit, he parried and blocked with his shield well enough, and one of his own swipes even cut across the pillar’s arm successfully – but it wasn’t enough when, just like earlier, a particularly good hit knocked George off balance and suddenly he was pinned against the wall of a smoldering building, their two swords clashing and putting him up close and personal with a sweaty man with very yellow teeth.

“Who are you supposed to be, the court jester?” the man snarled, pressing closer to George.

“Oh, god,” George couldn’t help himself from saying, “your breath is terrible --,”

Something over his assailant’s shoulder caught his attention, although his entire body was consumed with the effort of keeping the pillager’s sword away from him. Dream had successfully brought his fight down to a two-against-one, and was standing on the high ground on a small hill, fending off two pillagers at once. But what he couldn’t see was that behind him, a third pillager was racing up to meet him on a mangy-looking horse, a sword held high in the air, and as he reached Dream he brought it down in a clean arc towards his head –

George screwed his eyes shut and summoned up the last bit of magic energy he had left in him, praying it would be enough – and suddenly heard that mangy horse practically scream. When he opened his eyes again, he saw it doing exactly what he had asked it to do, which was to buck up in the air, toss its rider, and flee into the nearby forest. Dream’s would-be assailant smashed his head on the ground and went still, while Dream went on fighting, having never registered the danger he was in.

George exhaled in relief –

and then felt the sword pierce through his shoulder.

George shouted in shock, having for a moment forgotten that he was being attacked himself, and then used the pure adrenaline from the pain to heave the pillager away from him in a single motion and then run him through with his sword. He and his attacker stared at the sword in mutual shock before the pillager collapsed.

George took one breath, then another, his hand coming up to meet his shoulder where it was stabbed, finding it sticky with blood. He groaned, his head swimming, but tried to push through the haze in his vision as he looked frantically for Dream – was he okay? He had to make sure –

And there he was, plunging his sword into one last pillager while the remaining few fled rapidly on their horses. Dream was dirty with ash and blood, his eyes wild with battle, but George saw, even from a distance, that he was unharmed; his armor was barely even scratched.

George and Dream made eye contact, and the prince flashed an adrenaline-powered grin.

And then George collapsed.

He didn't pass out – the wound wasn't that bad – but he needed to sit down... he needed to sit down very badly. He focused on breathing and applying pressure to his shoulder as he saw Dream's feet race up to meet him, slowly registering the prince's voice.

"George, what the hell?! Are you okay?" Dream was shouting, kneeling in front of George to look at the wound. "Oh my god, George, *why* did you come down here?"

George looked at him like he was stupid. "Wanted to help," he muttered. His tongue felt heavy and leaden in his mouth.

Dream laughed shortly in disbelief. And then all of a sudden George was being scooped up easily in his arms, like some kind of maiden in distress.

"Hey," he squeaked, but Dream completely ignored him, marching resolutely through the village (where villagers called out profuse thanks as they put out the flames) and starting to climb the hill towards their horses.

"That was a stupid thing to do, George," Dream was saying, and George could hear the worry in his voice as clear as day. "I could have handled that on my own."

*You would have died without my help*, George thought, but bit back the words. "I helped a woman," he said instead, hearing with a wince how his words sort of slurred. Drained of both physical and magical energy, he let his head drop gently against Dream's shoulder, trading dignity for rest. Distantly, he could hear Dream's heart beating rapidly through the armor. "Wasn't completely useless."

Dream was silent as they reached their horses; he hoisted George carefully on top of Daisy, where he quickly secured him as George slumped forward, holding on to Daisy's saddle. And then George felt Dream's hand on his knee as Dream said, "You weren't useless at all, George. You were very brave."

---

One week later, George was up before the sun, stretching and yawning in the small, cozy room he had inhabited for the past two years. He glanced out of the small window cut into the stone above his bed and saw other servants already moving quietly about the castle grounds, preparing for the big day. Just like them, George had a lot to do today.

He took a moment at the small mirror in his room to undress his bandages and inspect his injured shoulder. It was nearly healed except for a small scar which he actually quite favored, but he kept the bandages on for appearances' sake considering his wound had disappeared supernaturally quickly, thanks to his gran.

"Once in the morning and once at night," she had said, applying a paste of natural herbs she had mixed with a healing potion that had taken her all night to concoct. "You'll be healed in a few days."

"Wow." The magic had started to set in almost immediately, and George felt as though he could actually feel the muscles in his shoulder repairing themselves. "Can you teach me how to do this?"

"Healing is the most difficult kind of magic," his gran had said as she continued her work. "Like with most things, it's easier to take life away using magic than it is to restore it. I can teach you, but it will take a long time. Even for you, little gifted one," she said as she ruffled his hair.

George sighed in slight exasperation at the memory, pulling his shirt back on and inspecting his appearance in the mirror. His gran still treated him like he was a little kid. George didn't feel like a kid anymore, though. He had responsibilities, now, real ones. Even if nobody else knew about the most important one.

The path from George's room to Dream's room was so familiar it might as well have been worn into the stone. The sun finally broke over the horizon as George followed his route through the halls, and the light coming through the castle windows quickened his pace. There were only so many hours in the day to prepare for the Tournament, which was to officially begin tomorrow.

As he reached the prince's quarters, George gently pushed open the double doors and saw a familiar sight: Dream sprawled out haphazardly across his double bed, his bedsheets tangled in his legs, his hair mussed and eyes closed, dead to the world. George smiled to himself as he heard a soft snore drift from the bed. *How precious*, he thought sarcastically, padding quietly across the room.

And then he ripped open the curtains, letting the sun pour in through the east-facing windows.

"Wakey wakey," he said cheekily as he heard a noise of protest from behind him.

"George," a barely-awake Dream groaned, squinting into the light. His hair stuck up around his ears and his eyes were bleary. "Close the curtains."

George clapped his hands instead, turning to walk towards him. "Big day today! Time to get up!"

"Too early," the prince grumbled, turning over and pulling his blanket over his head.

George grabbed the edge of the blanket and ripped it off of the bed entirely, making Dream sit up with a shout. “The Tournament competitors will be arriving in a few hours,” George reminded him. “I don’t think you want to oversleep.”

Dream glared. “You know there are nicer ways to wake a person up in the morning, George,” he muttered as he swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Especially *royalty*.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, *Your Highness*, what would you prefer next time?” George asked, opening Dream’s dresser to grab his outfit for the day.

“Breakfast in bed or something, I don’t know,” Dream mumbled, squinting into the sunlight again.

“In your dreams,” George said, shoving the clothes into Dream’s arms. “Get dressed while I go get your food.” Dream waved him away like he was shooing a fly and disappeared behind the small partition in the room to get dressed.

It had taken them both a while to adjust to their roles, but they had settled into it pretty well, George reflected as he made his way to the kitchens, brushing past other members of the castle staff and smiling at them in greeting. At first, he and Dream had acted totally friendly, as though nothing had changed, an illusion that was shattered the first time Dream had to ask him to do chores; then they had overcorrected into being entirely too formal with each other, before both calling it quits out of sheer misery. Now, they had found a good balance, retaining their friendliness with each other while respecting their mutual positions.

On George’s part, he had to overcome the natural awkwardness of fetching your friend’s laundry and breakfast and things. It wasn’t exactly helpful to his pride to basically be at Clay’s, and anybody else in the castle’s, beck and call. But George had swallowed his pride pretty quickly. Being at Dream’s side meant that he was there to protect him – secretly, of course – from the several deadly events that tended to threaten the prince’s life every month. That was his true role, not the errand boy he had to playact as during the day. Anyway, he had to recognize that most commoners would have killed to have his job. He was housed and fed well in the castle, paid enough to help his gran, and was even able to attend some lessons in his free time.

On Dream’s part, once he knew George was okay with the arrangement, his natural royal bossiness sort of took over, and they fell into mutual agreement. Besides, it wasn’t like George became a doormat just because he was a servant. George was a commoner and Clay was royalty, and that was just how it was; but there were no laws regulating how snippy George could be about it.

By the time George had returned with breakfast, Dream was sitting at his desk, looking out the window pensively. He had some of his finest clothes on, well-made leather pants and a red tunic which draped over his shoulders. He had washed his face and hair, and looked cleaner and more awake already.

“Are you ready for today?” George asked as he placed the tray of food on the desk. He jumped up to perch on an empty windowsill.

“I don’t know,” Dream said, breaking himself out of his thoughts. He inspected the tray, which was piled high with fruits, pastries and meats, and raised his eyebrows. “This is a lot. Have you eaten yet?”

“No, actually,” George said, having not even thought about it, and Dream pushed the tray towards him. George leaned over and grabbed an apple and a scone, which he dug into thankfully.

“You’ll need your energy, because there’s a lot to do today,” Dream said, and launched into the laundry list of chores he had for George. Most of them had already made it onto George’s internal list: Dream’s horse needed a full grooming, his armor needed polishing, and the tent he would use for the Tournament needed to be pitched and prepared for the following day.

“I’ll be greeting guests with my father in the Great Hall all day, so I won’t see you until tonight,” Dream finished.

“Scoping out the competition?” George asked lightly, but Dream didn’t respond, and the closed-off, nervous expression that had become so common over the past month returned to his face as he stopped eating breakfast and looked back out the window.

George looked at him with a hint of frustration. Dream was clearly worried about the Tournament, on some level greater than being nervous for the competition, but he refused to talk to George about it. Obviously, he didn’t have to. But also obviously, it was messing with his head. And George didn’t like seeing Dream like this, all closed off and unsure, so different from his usual, ultra-confident persona.

“Okay,” George finally said. “Good luck. I’ll make sure everything is ready for tomorrow, so don’t worry about it, okay?”

“Thanks, George,” Dream said, shooting him a grateful glance.

“No problem,” George said, jumping down from the windowsill. “And hey, if anyone gives you a bad vibe, just let me know and I’ll sneak into their tent tonight for some good old fashioned sabotage. Missing weapons, snakes in the bed, itching powder in the armor, you name it.”

This, *finally*, got a smile from Dream, his eyes crinkling up at the edges. “I’ll keep it in mind,” he said dryly as George gave a mock salute and set out for his chores.

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The castle grounds were bustling by noon, full of commotion from the participants who were arriving from all over Albion. The great field which was usually used as the knights’ training grounds had been repurposed into an enormous stadium, and the various nobles and lords who had come to compete strolled around surveying the field solemnly, as though treading the ground before the Tournament tomorrow would unlock some secret knowledge they would need to earn a spot on at the King’s side. With them came their servants, sometimes dozens of them, hauling in armor, weapons, and amenities for their master’s tents.

George had enlisted the help of a few other servants to pitch and organize Clay’s tent, and was walking towards the stables to attend to the horses, wiping sweat off his face, when a trumpet sound at the gates announced the arrival of yet another competitor. Curious, George stopped to catch his breath for a moment, hoping to catch sight of whoever was arriving. The rich nobles who competed in these tournaments often arrived with a parade of horses, carriages and carts, which was often an interesting spectacle.

The crowd parted for a moment and George was given a strange view. Two men entered the gates alone, carrying barely more than what fit on their backs. The men’s horses were groomed, but seemed somewhat lean and underfed, much like the two men themselves: unlike most of the other competitors, who looked strong in the somewhat false, practiced sense, these men gave the

impression of being dangerous by necessity. They were sort of lean and looked around sharply, as though anticipating an attack at any moment.

George suddenly felt a tingle at the base of his neck that sent a small bolt of dread shooting through his stomach. Something felt wrong about these men, something that he couldn't quite place. All he knew was that his instincts didn't like them, and his instincts weren't often wrong. He watched as they made their way through the crowd, attracting a few confused murmurs and glances.

"Hey, Bennett," he asked a familiar face walking by, "do you know who that is?"

Bennett was a third-generation member of the castle staff and served as the head steward for much of the daily operations. An older, graying man, he had seen everything and knew more about the members of far-reaching kingdoms than almost anyone; yet even his eyes narrowed as he inspected the newcomers, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"I've heard that competitors from Zeria are appearing for the first time in many years," he finally said, shrugging. "They're a far-off territory of Essetir's. Perhaps that's them."

"Zeria," George said, watching the backs of the men disappeared into the crowd. "Interesting."

The horse stables were behind him, and Daisy and Horsey were probably getting impatient, but George let the tingle at the back of his neck carry him towards the crowd where the two men had disappeared, following his instincts. Around him flowed a sea of people, some dressed in colorful garments and others in common garb; everyone was excited, animated, placing bets on who would be victorious in the upcoming competition. George tuned them out and pushed further towards the doors to the castle, where he assumed the men would be going to be received by the King.

As he reached the steps to the castle, he caught a glimpse of the two men, walking into the castle with their dark green and black robes. George sighed in frustration as they neared the doors, knowing he wouldn't be allowed into the Great Hall while the King's court was in session;

but at the last minute, the man who trailed behind the other turned around to look at the crowd, and George registered his face with a shock. The servant had a dark mark tattooed around his right eye.

Instantly, George was transported back to a week prior, to the village he and Dream had saved from pillagers; the man he had stabbed with the tattoo around his right eye. He tried to take a few more steps forward for a closer look, but the man had already turned around again and disappeared within the castle.

George's head spun. Could it be the same person? He had stabbed the pillager with the tattooed eye and had seen him fall; how could this be the same man? He touched his own magically-healed shoulder and dread pooled in the bottom of his stomach. A few of the pillagers had escaped. Was it possible they had magic?

If these were the same men, George thought, Dream was in danger. He pushed his way up the stairs and through the front doors of the castle, where he saw the enormous doors to the Great Hall shut with a loud thud. In front of the doors stood two fully-armored knights.

"I need to go inside," he rushed, running up to them.

The knights moved in front of him to stop him. "The King will not have any interruptions," said the one on the right.

"Please," George argued, clenching his fists. "It's important."

"What's going on?"

"The Prince may be in danger."

This stalled the knights and they glanced at each other. "Why? What's happening?"

*Oh, I think a man I killed might be here to kill the Prince...* "It's... hard to explain."

The knight who was speaking shook his head. "Not good enough."

"Listen, I just need to talk to Prince Clay!" George argued in frustration. The pillagers were in there, inside the Great Hall, and who knew what could happen...

What *could* happen? There were two of them inside, being met by King Daniel, Prince Clay, and the entire order of knights. Would they really make a move in the open like that? If that was their plan, George realized, surely they wouldn't have gone through this whole charade of entering the competition. They may as well have outright stormed the castle. And if they were to make a move now, they'd be killed before they had a chance at a second. No. Whatever they were planning, it must have been planned for the Tournament...

"If you really need to talk to him," the knight was saying, "the court will be breaking for mid-day meal in about an hour. You can find him then."

"Fine," George muttered and walked away, nervously rubbing his injured shoulder. Pacing outside the castle doors, George stalled once again, moving out of the way of the flow of people and standing against the inner castle walls, waiting. Before he brought this to Dream, he needed to be sure what he thought was true.

A few minutes later, the castle doors opened again and the two green-robed men exited, walking down the steps and making their way towards the field. George pushed off of the wall and fell into step a few yards behind them, staring intently at their backs. They were talking to each other, their heads close together, but the noise of the crowd prevented George from hearing their voices clearly.

Although George didn't need to cast vocal spells to do magic, his gran had taught him that doing so every now and then could help him focus his pure elemental powers into something more targeted, and that was proving itself to be true in real time. Relying on the anonymizing cover of the crowd, George whispered "**astyre**" under his breath, and his hearing immediately became magnified. He focused on the two men and his hearing focused, muffing the surrounding voices, so that George could hear as clearly as if they were standing right next to them as the taller man spoke:

"...and prepare for tomorrow," he was saying. "You're sure everything is ready?"

"We're ready," said the shorter, and George stopped in his tracks, hit once again with recognition: the *same voice*, the same man, leering in his face, "*who are you supposed to be, the court jester?*"

His lack of attention caused the spell to fall apart and the men disappeared into the crowd, but it didn't matter. George knew it was the same man, now, and once the court broke for their

meal, he would talk to Dream right away. He would understand.

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“You think... what?” Dream asked in utter confusion.

George stood bedraggled-looking and dusty in Dream’s chambers, but he was buzzing with energy, shifting his weight from side to side.

Dream himself looked impeccable, his clothes barely wrinkled, but he looked exhausted. The prince removed his crown and placed it carefully on his desk, his forehead furrowed.

George backtracked. “Did you recognize the two men who arrived earlier?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific,” Dream said.

“Green and black robes. Weird-looking. Unfamiliar.”

“Oh, you mean the men from Zeria?” Dream asked, frowning. “No, I didn’t recognize them. Zeria’s never appeared before the court.”

“Exactly,” George rushed, “well, not exactly, I mean. I don’t think they’re from Zeria at all.”

“Where else would they be from?” Dream asked as he down in his chair.

“I think they’re the pillagers. The ones we fought a week ago.”

Dream looked at George for a long, hard moment. “Why do you think this?”

“I recognized one of them. I think he’s posing as the servant,” George tried to explain. “He has a tattoo around his right eye.”

“And?”

“The pillager who attacked me – he had the same marking.”

Dream let that sit for a long moment, narrowing his eyes. “The one you stabbed?”

George suddenly realized he sounded very foolish. “Well – yes.”

“And killed?”

“Well – no, apparently not!”

“You’re basing this entirely off the fact that they both have eye tattoos, George? Tattoos aren’t rare, you know, especially for the servant class.”

“He has the same face, the same voice - I’m sure it’s the same person, Dream, I think I would know the face of the person who stabbed me!”

Dream still looked hesitant, but he shrugged his shoulders. “Well... I guess that’s hard to argue. I didn’t recognize them, though. George... you’re sure you’re not just still a little shaken from that battle a week ago? I know it’s new for you to be injured in battle, but we won. You don’t



have to be afraid of them.”

George felt his heart sink and crossed his arms. “You don’t believe me.”

“Come on, George, it’s not like that, it’s just... you have to admit this is hard to believe.”

*Fair enough.* “I’m not afraid of them for myself, anyway. I’m worried for *you*,” George said. “I recognize that man, Dream, I’m *sure* of it. And if they’ve gone through all this trouble of pretending to be someone they’re not to enter the Tournament, it must be to try and get revenge on you.”

“If that is true, I’m not worried about it,” Dream countered, straightening up in his chair. “It’ll be a fair fight, one on one. I’ll win.”

“But what if they *don’t* fight fair?” George returned, and the two sat in silence, contemplating the possibility.

The Tournament events – jousting, hand-to-hand combat, and the melee – all required actual weapons, and thus always contained an element of real danger. One bad move, one poorly aimed strike, could injure a man permanently. It had been a long time since anyone had died during a competition, but that was only because each man who entered held to his honor and avoided deadly strikes at all costs. If a man entered without those honorable intentions, he had the opportunity to inflict real damage on his opponent.

“Do you have any evidence?” Dream asked eventually, rubbing his forehead. “Other than the resemblance?”

“No,” George muttered and looked away. They both knew that wouldn’t be enough.

“I can’t bring that to my father. They’re claiming to be noble-born, even if they aren’t – and it’s our word against theirs. Well, your word, really,” Dream said with an apologetic glance George’s way. “And I don’t have time to do anything about this before the Tournament begins.”

“Okay,” George said, the wheels in his head turning. “Then I’ll do something. I’ll investigate tonight. And when I find evidence, I’ll bring it to you, and you can bring it to King Daniel, and he’ll remove them from the Tournament--,”

“No, George,” Dream interrupted. “We’re not going to do that, either.”

George was stunned, looking at his friend incredulously. “Why not?”

Dream stood and paced away, looking out the window. The same nervous, tense energy he had carried about him for the past month returned, pulling the air thin and taut like a rope about to break. “It’s hard to explain.”

George sighed in utter exasperation. He walked over to Dream and grabbed his arm, turning him away from his godforsaken window-gazing so that the prince had to look him in the eyes. “Dream,” he said quietly. “Can you just try? You’ve obviously been thinking a lot about this – about something. And it’s sort of driving me crazy that you won’t just... tell me.”

Dream looked startled (did he really think George wouldn’t notice?) and paused for a second, looking down at where George still held onto his arm. George suddenly felt very self-conscious about this and dropped his hand, sitting down on the edge of Dream’s bed, where he raised his eyebrows expectantly.

After another pause, Dream sighed and sat down in his chair, turning it so that he was facing George. He rested his elbows on his knees and composed his thoughts.

"I have to win tomorrow," he said, "and I have to do it fairly."

"You will," George interrupted, but Dream held up a hand and he took the hint, falling quiet.

"If tomorrow comes, and those men pull something in front of the entire Kingdom that proves they're attempting to harm me? Then we stop them. And we kick them out. But if I go to my father tonight and we do the same thing, without evidence, without proof? It will seem to everyone that I'm receiving preferential treatment." Dream's tone was serious, and George was struck by the solemnity in his words and posture.

"Tomorrow is my one chance to prove – once and for all – that I *deserve* a spot in my father's court," Dream continued, looking up at George. "That I'm not being placed there simply because of my birthright. If I win the Tournament, I will have earned my place as a Knight, and nobody will ever be able to say otherwise. But if it seems like I've won through using my father's favor, then I – and my father, and the entire court of Camelot – will be delegitimized. I will lose my one chance to gain the true respect of my people. I will be a poorer King someday, and Camelot will be a poorer Kingdom, for it." His eyes flashed and he looked back down, troubled.

*Ah.* So that was it. George leaned back, feeling like he had unlocked the key, or found the path that Dream's thoughts had clearly been treading over and over for the past month or so. This really was not just a competition to him: it was what his life had been leading up to.

"For that reason, we cannot go to my father about this," Dream finished, sitting back in his chair. "Not until they do something out in the open. Something everyone can see."

"But what if it's too late by then?" George said, anxiety spiraling in his chest at the thought of sitting back and *waiting* for them to do something to Dream. If they really did have magic, as he suspected, there was no telling what they could do – almost anything. And in a stadium of packed people, George's ability to interfere would be... severely limited, to say the least. "What if they hurt you, or kill you tomorrow?"

"They won't. I'll beat them," Dream said. He had that confident, arrogant gleam in his eye that George both admired and resented at times. "And if they do, at least I will have acted honorably."

This nearly knocked George off the bed. "You care more about your honor than your life, Dream, really?"

"I care more about my kingdom than my life, yes," Dream said quietly, and the words hung heavy and golden in the air, as though they were too important and precious to be argued with. "I can handle this on my own, George. Just... please, promise me you'll leave it alone."

George stayed quiet for a moment, staring at his hands. The moment hung strangely between them. His protective instincts were running into overdrive, telling him he couldn't just sit back and do nothing. But he also understood Dream, and he could see how important this promise was to him.

Eventually, he sighed. "I don't think this is a good idea," he said. "I think you've already proven yourself, Dream, and even if you don't win tomorrow, you will have earned your place as a Knight ten times over. And I don't think you rushing to get yourself hurt will somehow help the

kingdom, either. But --," he put up a hand as he saw Dream open his mouth to interrupt – "even if I don't think you're right... I get it. And if it's that important to you... I'll stay out of it." The words felt difficult to get out of his mouth.

The relief in Dream's eyes was obvious and immediate. "Thank you, George. Thank you."

"But the second they try and pull some shit," George warned, holding up a finger, "it's over, okay? They won't know what hit them."

Dream threw his head back and laughed, and George was both pleased that he seemed to relax and slightly annoyed that he took it as a joke.

"You're Camelot's secret weapon," he said, standing and patting George's non-bandaged shoulder.

"You have no idea," George muttered as Dream walked away.

---

George went through the rest of the tasks he needed to finish that day on autopilot, his mind constantly returning to his conversation with Dream. Hearing his view on the Tournament felt like everything had clicked into place. But it also filled him with a great deal of anxiety.

Dream didn't want him involved. At all. He needed to succeed tomorrow on his own merits – entirely. And George understood that - more than that – he respected it. Clearly, Clay did not want to rely on his divine right to the throne. He wanted to prove his worth, both to himself and to everyone else. And who could resent him for that?

And George had said he wouldn't interfere. He hadn't been lying. George lied to Dream every day he didn't tell him about his magic, and the sick feeling that big, necessary lie gave him meant that he had made a promise to himself a long time ago to never lie to Dream about anything else, as far as he could help it. So he intended to keep the promise he had just made. He wouldn't interfere tomorrow, he wouldn't go snooping around the pillager's tent tonight, even if every atom in his body was screaming at him to involve himself somehow, to prevent something bad from happening to Dream.

"He can handle himself," George muttered to Horsey as he brushed him for the final time that evening, trying to melt the cold feeling of fear spreading in his chest. Horsey neighed softly and dipped his head in agreement. George groaned and leaned his head against Horsey's shoulder, closing his eyes. "But what if he can't?"

Unbidden, a vivid image played out behind George's closed eyelids: Dream facing down the pillager in hand-to-hand combat; a burst of unseen magic throwing him to the ground; the pillager's sword driving down before anyone had a chance to react.

What would George do?

He saw himself standing, saw himself using his magic to push the pillager away, to hold the other in place until the knights could reach them and carry them both away.

And then he saw the knights approaching *him*, forcing him to his knees and dragging him off towards the dungeons.

He saw himself sitting in the cold dungeon, hugging his knees to his chest, dreading the light of morning.

And then he saw himself put to death when the morning finally came, burning on the pyre reserved for sorcerers.

And what would Dream do? How would he look at George, once he knew? Would he be shocked, confused, grateful? Would he be upset? Betrayed? Angry? Would he understand? Would he hate him?

Would he protest as the knights dragged him away, or would he remain silent? Would he speak to him in the dungeons, on George's last night? Would he watch as George burned? Or would he simply disappear?

These visions, so vivid otherwise, faltered when they reached Dream's face, and dissolved him into static. George had no idea how Dream would react. But no matter his reaction, the result of George revealing his magic remained true every time. King Daniel had no tolerance for sorcerers, regardless of how they used magic. He would spare no mercy for a servant in his own castle: he would probably expedite the execution, seeing it as a failure or an embarrassment. George would be made an example.

It was enough to wake George up in a cold sweat, many nights, plagued with the feeling of fire licking at his feet.

Yet he would do it, tomorrow, if that's what it took to save Dream's life, he thought, and the seriousness of the thought sort of scared him. He had read and re-read the prophecies a hundred times by now, though all they really did was reinforce the instinctual feeling George got in his gut every time he looked at Dream.

Dream was to be king, the greatest king Albion had ever seen. George could see it already in his fierce love for his kingdom, his willingness to throw himself into danger for his people, and his pure talent and intelligence and capability.

George's job was to get him there. Whatever it took. Compared with that great destiny, George felt, his life was merely a footnote.

But the fear remained in George's chest as he put away his grooming tools, patting Horsey once more before leaving the stables, heading for his room for the night.

As he passed the rows of tents now set up and waiting for the morning to come, George stopped with a start as he saw the pillager – the tattooed pillager – emerge from his tent several yards ahead of him. George stood still and watched as the man looked around him, caught sight of George, and met his gaze. The man's eyes widened as George's narrowed.

The man grinned slowly, raising a hand and giving George a little wave.

Then he disappeared inside of his tent.

## Chapter End Notes

thank you SO MUCH for all of your kind comments!! they make my day every time & are such enormous motivators!

rest assured that I have a plan for this story and I'm VERY, VERY excited to tell the rest of it :) i'm happy with how this chapter ended up, but the future chapters....  
hooooooooo boy

coming up in chapter 4: the tournament, sapnap and bad return, & a few new/familiar faces enter the mix....

## sixteen, pt. 2

### Chapter Notes

it's tommy time, baby !  
(plus some other stuff)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Clay was awake before George arrived to drag him out of bed, for once. It was early – still dark outside, though the sky was slowly starting to lighten in the east. Clay pushed his blankets off and swung his legs over the side of the bed, where he sat for a long moment, staring into space.

His dream from last night played on a loop in his head.

It was a recurring dream he had been having for years. More of a series of images and words than anything. There was golden light all around, and the feeling of warmth, total warmth and security.

His mother was there, though he couldn't see her face. It was always either hidden behind her waves of blonde hair or obscured in the glare of the sun, as though her face was the source of the light itself. When she spoke, her voice sounded like a woman's voice, but it also sounded like the wind, or maybe the sound of a harp.

"You will be a great knight, Clay, and a greater King," she had said, as she always did, and he had felt the ghost of a touch on his head, on his cheek. "So long as you always follow the true path, and not the easy one."

"How will I know which is which?" he heard himself ask, his voice wavering and unsure, both a child and himself at the same time.

"You know truth," she responded simply. "It is your gift. Trust it." There were a few more lovely sounds he could never make out – like wind chimes. And then the light fell away.

She spoke no more than a few dozen words. He had committed them all to heart many years ago. He thought it must be a memory of his mother. It was the only way to explain the consistency – how the scene never changed. Yet when he tried to conjure up the memory in his head, independent of the abstract unreality of the dream, it slipped away elusively.

It was so different from what always followed.

The second part of the dream, the bad part, was undoubtedly a memory. Clay knew because he could see it in detail by closing his eyes, even while awake. Himself, a child, cowering in a closet, holding his breath so as not to make a sound, peeking through the cracks in the door. His mother, slammed against the wall by some unseen force. The sorcerer, a dark-haired woman dressed in black, demanding something from her. Her refusal. And then...

Clay shook the vision from his head and rubbed his face, bringing himself back to reality. The dream didn't scare him anymore, like it had the first few times. But it did still give him a strange, deep feeling in his chest. A pulling, or a calling towards something. It was difficult to articulate, though he felt it more clearly every day. That dream held the key to something. It was a clue pointing him towards the feeling in his chest that never left, the feeling he was never able to fully explain.

*His purpose.* He had one, even though he didn't know what it was. It felt secret and unspeakable, too personal to tell anyone, too vague to even try. It was more than the fact that he would be King. It was something he felt sure nobody would understand.

It was why he had taken so long to speak to George about his feelings regarding the Tournament. His friend had ultimately taken it well, all things considered. Clay knew his reasoning wasn't sound – that his motives weren't purely logical. But he felt convicted, sure that he had to prove himself today without aid, even if meant knowingly entering an unfair fight. It was an act which held greater importance to him than he could properly explain.

He wished he had the words, he thought, bunching his bedsheets in his hands in frustration. He wished he could communicate to George directly. Just place his friend inside of his head and show him the way he felt, the way this big, enormous *thing* just sat inside of his head and chest and screamed for attention. But he couldn't. And if he tried to say it out loud... he didn't think George would understand. Mostly because he could barely understand it himself. There was probably nobody else in the world, actually, who could understand.

Except, perhaps, his mother. She saw that pulling, that purpose in him before he saw it in himself. That's what the dream meant, he thought. It was a reminder.

*You're not the only one who sees it. She saw it, too.*

*If only she were here,* he thought for the millionth time, and felt the wave of grief roll over him, as sharp and breathtaking as it was the day he watched her die.

When he felt like he could breathe again, he picked himself up and walked towards the armor set out for him on his table. Engraved onto his shield was his family's crest.

Seeing the symbol made pride start to swell in his chest, slowly taking the place of his grief. This crest was his heritage signified. His mother and father had combined their family crests at their marriage. On the right side, his father's crest sported a roaring bear, representing the ferocity and strength of Daniel's lineage. It was juxtaposed with the animal from his mother's crest on the left: a phoenix, its wings spread, caught aflame. It fit perfectly with Camelot's colors: red and gold.

Clay was still looking at the shield as he heard the door behind him open and close. It was George. He knew without turning around, knew the way George moved, the way he changed the air in a room. He heard George walk to the table, setting down breakfast.

"You're up early," George said quietly.

Clay turned. George looked serious, lacking his usual jovial morning demeanor. He was looking at Clay closely, but when they made eye contact, George glanced away.

"Just getting ready," Clay responded, and to his relief, his voice came out clearly. He took a deep breath and set the shield down. "Let's eat."

The two of them sat at the table together and started eating from the tray of food George had brought from the kitchen, a meal-sharing ritual that happened often, even though it probably wasn't very proper. Outside, the sun was rising, shedding rays through the windows. Already, Clay could hear commotion from villagers and noble spectators starting to arrive, filling in the stands that would be packed by the time the tournament began in a few hours. He took a deep breath, putting down a piece of bread unfinished. George had stopped eating, too. He looked lost in his thoughts.

"It's about that time," Clay finally said.

George nodded, breaking himself out of his trance. "Want to put your armor on?"

Clay nodded and rose, disappearing behind the partition to change into the linen clothes he would wear underneath his tournament armor. When he emerged, George was waiting to help get him into his armor like he had done a hundred times before. This time, though, the actions felt heavier, almost solemn. George started to help Clay put on each piece of chainmail and armor, tying each knot and fastening the straps to hold each piece in place. It was a job that needed a capable pair of hands. George had grown adept at it quickly.

Silence stretched between them as George worked, and Clay got the distinct impression they both had something they wanted to say to the other, but didn't know how. In his head were the words: *I know you don't understand why I have to do this, but I think it's something bigger than myself...*

George was standing behind Clay, tying the knots that laced up Clay's back, when he finally broke the silence.

"Dream," he started.

Clay couldn't help but smile at the nickname. George was the only one who still called him Dream. Sapnap and Bad had gotten a little too old, treated him a little too formally. But with George, he could still be Dream. He liked it that way.

"Last night, while I was leaving the stables, I saw that man again," George continued, his hands brushing against Dream's back as he worked meticulously. "The one with the tattoo. I think he recognized me."

Something lying dormant in Dream's chest started to wake up. "Did he threaten you?"

"No," George responded and Dream's protectiveness tentatively died down. "They're not here for me, Dream."

Dream heard the meaning in the words, took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. So we know for sure it's them, and that they'll be dangerous. It's good to know."

"There's still time to talk to your father, you know," George said, coming around to Dream's front, inspecting his work so far. He wasn't making eye contact with Dream, and his voice came off casual, as though he didn't have a stake in it. Taking Dream's left wrist in his hand, George started strapping his gauntlet onto his forearm. "He'd believe you."

"No," Dream said simply, although he understood his friend's need to try one more time. "We have to wait until they do something clearly malicious. Anything before that will disqualify me."

George's eyes stayed trained on his task, but his grip on Dream's wrist tightened almost



imperceptibly, and his face betrayed his emotions.

“I know you don’t totally understand, George, but just follow my lead on this, okay?” Dream said. George’s eyes flickered up to Dream’s face for a moment; he bit the inside of his cheek, obviously conflicted, but then nodded.

“It’s your call, Dream,” he said, grabbing Dream’s right arm to fasten its gauntlet into place. “If this is what you think is right, then... I trust you.”

The simple admission resonated in the meager space between them as George finished with Dream’s armor, taking one last minute to test each knot and strap and ensure each was tightly fastened. He stepped back to look over his handiwork, and Dream spread his arms.

“How do I look?” Dream asked, raising his eyebrows.

George snorted and shook his head. “Well, you’re no Prince Charming, but...”

Dream laughed, grateful to feel the anxious tension ease between them. “Oh, come on, I’m plenty charming,” he argued back, turning to inspect himself in the mirror. His armor was spotless, the colors of his shield brilliant in the sunlight, and he quickly ruffled his light hair which had grown just long enough to reach his ears. “There’s going to be all kinds of ladies there. You don’t think I look handsome?”

He was joking, but when he looked back at George, his friend was sort of stammering. “No, you – you look... good,” George said, and then went honest-to-god red in the face, which delighted Dream. He wheezed lightly with laughter and pushed George’s shoulder, making his friend smile sheepishly, his face still red.

“I’m messing with you, George. Come on. Let’s go find Sappap and Bad.”

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They weren’t hard to find.

“Prince Clay!” Sappap’s voice boomed even over the low roar of the crowd, and Clay and George saw him pushing through the crowd towards them with a gleeful grin, his arms lifted high in the air. “You ready to get your butt kicked?”

Clay laughed as he embraced Sappap briefly. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Sappap mussed up George’s hair, causing him to squawk in protest. They stood just outside the gates of the Tournament, which were adorned with arrangements of flowers and colorful banners. On all sides of them filtered one of the biggest crowds ever seen in Camelot. Noblemen and ladies made their way to the shaded seats with an excellent view of the field, while villager children raced around the grounds, thrilled just to be within the outer castle walls.

As he watched the commotion, George saw Bad finally push through the crowd as well, jogging up to join them. Unlike Sappap and Clay, who were both in their armor, Bad was dressed in his typical day clothes, having chosen not to enter the Tournament this year. He had been spending most of his time in his family’s fiefdom to support his father after he had fallen ill. In typical Bad fashion, he was chipper and seemed utterly unbothered by his exclusion from the day’s competition.

"I took a look at the lineup, and it is going to be an incredible day," he told Clay.

"I mean, we already know I'm going to beat you in jousting *and* hand-to-hand," Sapnap boasted at Clay, who crossed his arms, "but I think we can both agree the *real* highlight is gonna be our team-up during melee."

This broke a broad grin across Clay's face, and he clasped Sapnap's arm, nodding once. "Okay, *that* we can agree on."

"We're gonna crush it!" Sapnap crowed triumphantly, drawing some pointed glances from the people who were passing them on all sides. Bad and George shot each other semi-exasperated glances and fell in behind Clay and Sapnap as they started walking further into the tournament grounds.

"How have you been, George?" Bad asked, and George looked at his friend with a smile.

"I've been alright," he said, in what he supposed was honesty. He had been so preoccupied with his thoughts that he had forgotten to look forward to the tournament itself, the chance to spend time with his friends. "How are you? How's your father?"

A small shadow crossed over Bad's face, and he seemed to respond honestly, too. "He's not doing well. I wish I could be here more often, but right now, I'm glad I'm there to help him."

George nodded and placed a hand on Bad's shoulder. "You're a really good person, Bad."

Bad shot him a grateful smile and then dipped his head towards Clay. "And how has our dear Royal Highness been?"

George snorted and looked at the back of Clay's head as the prince obviously wheezed with laughter over something Sapnap had said. "He's been an idiot, overall, but I've managed to keep him alive somehow."

"Sounds about right," Bad laughed as the four of them reached the tents. Clay and Sapnap turned around, and the four of them made a familiar little circle.

"The first round starts in a few minutes," Sapnap said. "It's probably time for us to go."

"George and I will be cheering for you. We believe in you guys," Bad said earnestly, and Clay and Sapnap smiled at him genuinely.

"Yeah, and I promise only to throw a few tomatoes when you lose," George smirked, earning himself a punch on the shoulder from Sap.

George was about to follow Bad to the noble's stands, figuring he could sneak in pretty easily, but Clay grabbed his shoulder, stopping him with an apologetic look on his face.

"Sorry, George," he said, "but in case I need you... you have to sit in the servant's stands." He turned George in a 180 and pointed him towards a small, worn-down set of benches closest to the tents, where several dozen sullen-looking men dressed in servant's clothing watched the field with almost total disinterest.

"Yippee," George said flatly as Sapnap failed to hide his snicker.

"You'll be fine," Clay said, while Bad tried to cheer him up: "it'll be okay George, just make a new friend!"

Bad meant it genuinely, but it made Sapnap roar with laughter, and George shot him an exasperated glare as Bad protested: “what, what’s so bad about that!”

“Sorry, Georgie,” Sapnap said, clapping him on the shoulder. “You’re the best, man. I’m giving you my favor once I win, for sure.”

George rolled his eyes, flushing with embarrassment at the thought of Sapnap throwing him his favor, the small token usually given to a lady who had caught the knight’s eye during competition. Of course, his redness just made Sapnap laugh harder as he and Clay disappeared into the sea of competitors. Bad waved goodbye and headed in the opposite direction.

The servant’s seats would be fine, George told himself as he neared them, despite the dour atmosphere standing in stark contrast to the festivities happening everywhere else in the stadium. Actually, it would probably be for the best. The servants had a very direct view of the field, they had close access to the tents, and the lack of distractions and attention around him would let him focus on what was happening – and keep a close eye on the pillagers, who he hadn’t yet spotted.

George found a seat near the middle of the stands and sat down, getting as comfortable as he could and preparing himself for a long, mostly lonely tournament experience.

It didn’t last long.

“Ello,” came a bright voice as someone sat next to him – *right* next to him, uncomfortably close. It surprised George so much that he didn’t even respond at first, just moved a few inches away from the boy who had sat down next to him with no concept of personal space. It was another servant, George figured; a kid, a few years younger than him, with a shock of unruly blonde hair and an oversized grin. He seemed to buzz with hyper energy, sort of like a puppy.

“Hello,” George eventually said back, furrowing his brow.

“Name’s Tommy,” the child said immediately, sticking a hand out so far it nearly bumped into George’s chest. “Pleased to meet ya.”

George took Tommy’s hand tentatively and the boy vigorously shook his arm up and down a few times before returning his focus to the field as though nothing had happened. “Nice... to meet you as well,” he said in confusion. “I’m George.”

He almost immediately regretted giving the kid any kind of information as Tommy sucked in air through his teeth, clicking his tongue a few times. “George, George, George, George, George, George, George...” he said. “Can’t say I recognize it. We haven’t met before?”

“No,” George said, “definitely not.” He would remember.

“Where you from?”

“Camelot.”

“Ah, Camelot, love the place, grand old place,” Tommy said with an air of worldliness. “Not as great as Mercia, mind you, that’s where I’m from, you know, but decent, definitely, knows how to throw a great Tournament that’s for sure...” His words steadily increased in speed as they went, like an avalanche of sound.

George just looked at him in bewilderment as the trumpets cut him off, calling attention to the center of the field as the spectators finally settled into their respective seats. Everyone’s gazes focused on the men riding into the field on their horses: King Daniel led the charge, followed by

his Knights. As Daniel reached the center of the field, he pulled his horse to a stop and the spectators quieted.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, his voice effortlessly filling the stadium. “Welcome to our Tournament!”

The audience cheered and applauded; George clapped as Tommy let out a loud whoop of excitement.

“I won’t take too much of your time,” King Daniel continued once the noise quieted down, “but it hardly needs saying that I greatly look forward to watching today’s festivities. I know our participants will compete with honor, and I hope to welcome a few of them into my court today. So without further ado, let us welcome this year’s competitors!”

The King and his knights dismounted, handing their horses off to a group of servants and taking their places in the King’s booth, which sat exactly across the field from George and had the best view of the field by far. As they took their seats, the trumpets sounded again, and the competitors rode into the field on horseback.

The competitors were lined up by kingdom, and George recognized the groupings based on the colors of the crests on their shields. First came the men from Northumbria, the cold northern lands; their faces were pale and stoic, their colors dark blue and black, as they solemnly entered the field, hardly reacting to the cheers and shouts that met them.

Next was Mercia, sporting green and silver. As they passed by, Tommy leaped to his feet, shouting, “that’s my boy! Get ‘em Wilbur!”

An older man with a frock of brown hair shot Tommy an exasperated glance as he passed, but Tommy was undeterred: he let loose with another piercing whoop, punching the air enthusiastically, and after the man had passed by, he sat down with a satisfied exhale.

“That’s the man I serve,” he told George in a loud whisper, as though it weren’t exceedingly obvious. “Lord Wilbur of Mercia. He’s fantastic. Definitely gonna show ‘em who’s boss.” He raised his eyebrows at George exaggeratedly, like he had let him in on a secret.

“I’ll keep my eye on him,” George responded, stifling a grin. As obnoxious as Tommy was, he was twenty times more entertaining than anyone else in the servant’s stands.

The men from Nemeth, a close ally of Camelot’s, followed Mercia, dressed in oranges and whites. Then came Essetir. Their colors were a dark purple and black.

At the end of this group trailed the man from “Zeria.” He looked distinct from the group. He sported the right colors, but they were somewhat faded. Placed next to the other competitors, it was even starker how different he looked, slightly malnourished and scrappy. Yet nobody else seemed to care as the procession moved on. George narrowed his eyes at the pillager as he passed, but the man didn’t even seem to notice him. He sat silently on his horse, his gaze flickering around the stadium warily.

Then, finally, the cheers of the crowd rose to a roar as the competitors from Camelot entered the field in blaze of red and gold. There were five competitors from Camelot this year, including Clay and Sapnap, who was clearly soaking up the attention for all it was worth, grinning cheekily and bowing chivalrously as he passed the ladies’ stand. Clay led the group, beaming and waving confidently as his horse trotted proudly around the arena.

George couldn't take his eyes off of Clay. Compared to everyone else in the arena, Clay practically shone. The sun caught his colors and his armor perfectly, and although he was significantly younger than most of the other competitors, he carried himself with spectacular confidence and grace.

George hadn't expected to be struck by his appearance like this, since sometimes it felt like all he did all day was look at Clay. But this was different than the bedraggled boy he had to drag out of bed in the morning, his friend who he had eaten breakfast with. This was someone else, someone strong and regal. Clay was in his element. His eyes danced and his hair was ruffled lightly by the breeze.

*He is stupidly handsome*, George thought out of nowhere, and then tried to keep himself from flushing in embarrassment (*again*) from the unexpected thought. It was fine to note the obvious, he told himself, doing his best to ignore the fluttery feeling in his chest as Clay's eyes found him in the stands. Clay pointed right at him and his smile grew impossibly wider, and George couldn't help but smile back and roll his eyes.

"Which one is yours?" Tommy asked, trying to track George's gaze.

"Prince Clay," he said proudly, gesturing, and Tommy's eyes grew wide.

"Wow," Tommy said, shaking his head. "True royalty, eh? Must be pretty nice, 'less he's an arse. Is he an arse?"

"I mean, sort of, but not in a bad way," George said absently as he watched Clay dip his head towards the ladies in the stands, seeing a few of them giggle to each other as he passed them by.

The procession of competitors returned to their tents as the first event, jousting, began. Jousting was a highly entertaining, intense competition. Two people rode toward each other on horses, each holding long lances. Whoever successfully unseated the other was the winner. Armor usually absorbed some of the impact of the lance, but it was always harrowing seeing people fall from galloping horses.

As the preliminary rounds commenced, George clapped and cheered along with the crowd as several knights were knocked from their horses. Tommy practically blew George's right ear out when Wilbur won his first round, but fell into unhappy grumbles when the pillager unseated Wilbur on the second round. George, for one, was occupied with staring at the pillager's every move, trying to catch any hint of genuine malice or magic. He couldn't spot any obvious foul play, but the pillager still won, moving incredibly fast to ram Wilbur off his horse.

"That's alright, big man, you'll get him next time," Tommy shouted as Wilbur led his horse off the field, only to mutter to George, "only have to wait another five years..."

"I heard that," Wilbur shot at him as he passed, and Tommy made a face at George, who couldn't help but laugh.

Sapnap won his first round handily, sending a man from Northumbria packing. Then Clay emerged, taking up his position against a man from Essetir who was nearly twice his size.

"Come on, Dream..." George whispered under his breath as Clay fastened his helmet and the starting drum sounded. The two competitors barreled at each other, and George's heart jumped into his throat as the Essetirian's lance glanced against Clay's shoulder; but Clay's aim was truer. His lance caught against the bottom of the man's chestplate, and he was tipped to the ground,

which he hit in an explosion of dust. The crowd cheered as Clay steered his horse around, offering a chivalrous hand to his opponent and helping him up. George felt a swell of warmth as he saw Clay leaving the field, grinning happily.

Sapnap, Clay, and the pillager all kept winning, as well as a man from Nemeth, who Clay just barely managed to unseat in the semifinal round, winning himself a spot in the finals. George cheered until his throat felt hoarse, and Tommy had begrudgingly crossed his arms, admitting, “okay, so he is *pretty* good.”

It was Sapnap against the pillager in the other semifinal. Noticing this pairing, George’s excitement dissolved back into serious concern. He leaned forward in his seat, watching the pillager with eagle eyes as he took position across from Sapnap. The starting drum boomed, and the two competitors raced towards each other, picking up speed as they went. Jousting was as much a game of chicken as anything, and in this round, neither person was backing down.

Their lances hit each other squarely in the chest at the same time, and George winced with the rest of the crowd as the impact of the hit clearly rocked both competitors. In a momentary push, Sapnap managed to hold on just a little longer, push forward a little more, and the pillager hit the ground as Sapnap lifted his arms victoriously to a roaring crowd.

George jumped to his feet as well, punching the air and shouting in excitement and relief. The pillager picked himself up from the dust with an angry expression, and George watched as he shot a dirty look towards the stands. George followed his gaze and saw the tattooed pillager in the stands on the opposite side of the field, shrugging his shoulders.

Relief felt like a cold glass of water to George, who sat back in satisfaction on the bench. Sapnap had done well, and now the pillagers wouldn’t have a chance to get close to Clay in this event.

“Competing in the final round... Squire Sapnap and Prince Clay, both of Camelot,” shouted the announcer, and the Camelotians in the crowd cheered wildly.

George watched eagerly as Clay and Sapnap guided their horses towards each other in the center of the field, clasping arms with large grins on their faces. Sapnap said something into Clay’s ear and Clay threw his head back in laughter, and then the two were galloping for their respective sides, putting on their helmets.

The crowd fell into a hushed silence as they took their places.

The drum sounded off like a cannon and the two were racing towards each other. Clay was leaning forward in his saddle, and he looked so comfortable, barely even moving as his horse’s hooves pounded into the ground.

The two met in the middle and George’s heart leapt into his throat as Sapnap’s lance made contact first, knocking Clay off balance and halfway out of the saddle. The crowd gasped as the prince nearly fell off his horse –

but he dug his right foot into the stirrup and hoisted himself back onto the saddle. Neither had fallen.

The two turned around and faced each other again. Round two. The crowd was ecstatic.

The drum sounded and the two raced towards each other again, their horses’ hoofbeats echoing in the arena. This time, Clay’s lance reached Sapnap just a little sooner – but George

suddenly realized, as he looked across the field, that the tattooed pillager's mouth was moving; he was speaking words that George could almost lip-read, and several things happened in quick succession.

First, Clay's lance hit Sapnap dead-on and sent him flying to the ground.

Second, Clay's saddle strap broke and the saddle started to slide down Clay's horse's side, sending him tumbling towards the horse's hooves.

George jumped to his feet but before he could even think of how to react, Clay had already hit the ground dangerously close to his running horse, rolling a few times before coming to a complete stop. George's heart caught in his throat as Clay was still for a long moment, the dust settling.

And then Clay pulled himself to his feet, removing his helmet and waving at the crowd with an exhausted grin.

The crowd went crazy at the dramatic finale, and Clay was presented to his father as the winner of the event. George saw Daniel nod, though he betrayed no other emotion, and Clay nodded back. Then he went to collect Sapnap, the two briefly embracing again and walking back to the tents side by side.

George had been so consumed by the whole event that he had barely breathed, and finally felt himself relax as he watched Clay safely exit the field. His magic tingled in his hands, but he had managed to keep it at bay. It physically pained him to do so, though. Especially now that he was certain the pillagers were using magic.

"Well, THAT was a trip," Tommy said, and George glanced at him, having almost forgotten about the boy sitting next to him. "I guess what they say about Camelot blokes is right, eh? Really are some tough bastards."

"I guess so," George said, feeling a rush of affection for his friends. Foul play aside, the two of them had just conquered their greatest challenge yet. He desperately wanted to go talk to them, and got to his feet as the Tournament went on break for a few minutes before the melee.

"Can I come with?" Tommy said immediately and jumped up next to him, trailing behind him as George walked towards the tents. "Ooh, or I might go get something to eat, I saw some amazing looking drumsticks being sold at the entrance..."

"Do whatever you want, Tommy," George said distractedly, and was somewhat grateful as the boy split away from him. Right at this moment, George just wanted to talk to Dream.

He found him in a group of other competitors sporting various colors, laughing in a small circle. Clay had dust in his hair and all over his armor, but he was smiling, practically glowing after the first event.

George tapped him on his shoulder and Clay turned around with a surprised grin. "Hi, George."

"Congratulations," George said, and the two boys smiled at each other happily, but then George's face fell. "Did you see what happened?"

Clay's face soured as well, and he glanced towards the other competitors who might have been within earshot if they were paying attention. "Let's talk about this later."

“Clay,” George whispered, “I think they’re using m-,”

“*I know*,” Clay cut him off through gritted teeth. “Nothing’s changed from when we talked earlier. Alright? I’ll see you later.”

George felt confused and frustrated as Clay turned away from him, returning to his conversation with the other competitors. The circle was closed. George was clearly no longer invited.

His pride smarting, George walked away from the tents and back towards the stands, where he saw Tommy waiting for him with an enormous drumstick in hand.

“Look at the size of this thing!” Tommy was saying in amazement as George sullenly joined him, crossing his arms and looking towards the field. “What, are the chickens the size of horses in Camelot?”

“I think it’s a turkey leg,” George responded flatly.

“At any rate, it’s sort of cold, which is a disappointment,” Tommy continued, and George was ready to tune him out completely until he heard Tommy whisper “**baerne**” under his breath, at which point his attention was entirely, 100% laser-focused on the boy, who was about to take a bite from a suddenly steaming drumstick.

“What did you just do?” George snapped, grabbing Tommy’s arm and pulling him towards the back of the stands, away from where people could overhear them.

Tommy looked guilty. “Uh... nothing.”

“You just used magic,” George accused in a whisper, in utter disbelief. “To warm up your drumstick.”

Tommy shrugged.

“Do you know how stupid that was?”

“Oh, come on, it’s not like anybody saw,” Tommy tried to deflect.

“You --- *I* saw,” George hissed, “and you’re lucky I’m not the type of person to report you. You know magic is *punishable by death* in Camelot, right?”

Clearly, Tommy didn’t know this, or at least didn’t fully understand it, as his face went a little pale. “Well, it’s not technically allowed in Mercia, either, and I still get ‘way with it,” he muttered, trying to brush it off with a little false bravado. It was true that Mercia had recanted its previous acceptance of magic, but everyone knew it was informally accepted there, as long as it wasn’t flaunted. “Calm down, George, it’s charming you care so much but I’m fine, really.”

“You,” and then George couldn’t help but laugh in disbelief, rubbing his face with his hands. No. No way. This was one too many things to deal with. “You can’t do that in Camelot, Tommy,” he eventually said. Tommy just looked away uncomfortably. “Seriously. Put a lid on it.”

He started to march back to the stands, ready to wash his hands of the whole situation, but incredibly, Tommy continued to trail behind him, daring to ask, “so... if you don’t mind me asking, why *aren’t* you reporting me then?”

George shot him a look. “I’m not a big fan of child executions, Tommy.”



“I am *not* a child,” Tommy immediately protested, but his voice kind of squeaked on the middle word, and George just rolled his eyes at him as they took their seats. The melee was about to begin.

A favorite of many spectators, the melee involved groups of five competitors facing each other down. Each armed with a shield and their choice of weapon, the goal was to push the opposing team back and past a marked line. The first team to successfully push back 3 of the other team’s 5 members would win the round. Considering it needed a significant amount of prior cooperation, the teams were largely divided by kingdom.

George spotted Clay and Sarnap talking to each other and smiling as they took the field for their first round. George crossed his arms, still feeling a bit hurt by how Clay had completely dismissed him earlier. He was having a hard time telling if Clay was operating on pure arrogance or not. He wanted to keep his promise not to interfere, but he also wanted Clay to take the threat to his life seriously, and he wasn’t sure that was happening.

Clay and Sarnap’s countless hours training for the melee event with the other Camelot competitors paid off. They were more than capable on the field, winning their first few rounds with ease. Clay often led the charge, usually claiming responsibility for pushing at least one or two opponents past their line. Despite George’s slight resentment towards him, he couldn’t help but feel captivated at the way Clay moved. He was especially clever, often backing up to bait his opponent into a faulty swipe and then seizing the opportunity to push him back several steps.

A team from Essetir was winning, too, though George noted with interest that each time the team containing the pillager took the field, the other members seemed to glance at him with discomfort. George wondered how, exactly, the pillagers had managed to convince the other Essetirians that they were really from some random territory within its borders. Clearly, it hadn’t worked perfectly.

There was something unnatural in the way the pillager moved, George thought, as the team from Essetir beat the Mercian team containing Lord Wilbur in their semifinal round. However quickly he seemed to move normally, he was always twice as fast in the defining blow. His sword became more blur than weapon. It consistently caught his opponent by surprise. George probably would have chalked it up to the adrenaline burst of the final attack if he hadn’t known who the pillagers were.

Tommy groaned in disappointment as Mercia left the field defeated. “Looks like your golden boy’s up yet again, George.”

“Looks like it,” George murmured as Camelot and Essetir took the field for the final. The two teams of five stood across from each other, and George could see the pillager set his sights directly on Clay, adjusting his grip on his sword. The prince set his stance in preparation.

As soon as the drum went off, the pillager made a mad rush for Clay, but the prince was ready for it and met him with an equal blow. The two began to clash as the others on their team fought around them, laser-focused on each other.

Clay fought admirably, gaining little ground but not losing any, either, until the pillager pulled one of his ultra-fast motions and slashed his sword against Clay’s knees. The armor absorbed the blow, but it knocked Clay off balance, and he was regaining his footing as the pillager moved lightning quick, bringing the sword up above his head in an alarming motion –

and Sarnap was there, bringing his sword up to parry the blow, pushing the pillager back in a single smooth motion. The crowd cheered as Clay and Sarnap tried to regain their ground, falling

into their usual rhythm.

But they were a little too late. In their absence, their team members had been successfully pushed back by the other capable Essetirian fighters, and by the time Clay and the pillager met each other again, the drum sounded and Essetir had won.

All the breath left George's body in one relieved exhale as he watched Clay and Sapnap leave the field unharmed. The two were clearly disappointed at the loss, but they were also alive – a win in George's eyes. Behind them, he could see the pillager trying to hide a scowl despite his team's victory, glaring daggers at the prince's back.

There was something about this whole situation that fundamentally didn't make sense to George as he watched the Essetirians being presented to the King as victors. If the pillagers were there to kill Clay, and they were using magic; then why the theatrics? Why enter as a competitor? And why the slyness – trying to make it seem as though Clay merely lost or was injured naturally? Why not just – *do it* already? The pillager using magic had a clear view of Clay. Surely, he must have had greater magic than the ability to speed up his compatriot's motions and undo Clay's saddle strap. Instead, they seemed intent on playing this game, using just enough magic to give them an edge but not enough to be obvious. If they were attempting to avoid execution, they shouldn't have been trying to kill Clay in the first place.

The question itched George's brain as the short break before the final event began and he trailed after Tommy, who ran into the tents to look after Wilbur. It was one thing to feel helpless. It was another to not even fully understand what he was helpless against.

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The instant Clay made it into his tent after the melee, he dropped heavily into the chair that waited for him, taking a deep breath. He had expected the Tournament to take it out of him, but the final round of melee had been especially draining. In his first actual confrontation with the man from Zeria, he had realized just how dangerous the scrawny-looking stranger could actually be. If Sapnap hadn't been there...

He wasn't sure. He wasn't sure if he had done the right thing. Made the right call. Anxiety started to flicker in his head, and he felt distracted, unfocused. "Okay, you're fine, you got this, you got this," he said under his breath, trying to calm himself down, but the exhaustion in his body pulled his mind in multiple directions, a poor sign for the mental focus that he would need during hand-to-hand combat.

Just as he felt he was starting to panic, he heard the tent flap open, and turned to see George entering, ducking through the entrance.

"Hi," Dream said with a relieved exhale.

"Hi," George responded. He looked nice, Dream realized, surprised at the thought; his face looked pink from the sun, his hair tousled, and he held himself in a sort of guarded way, his lanky arms lightly crossed. He also looked unsure of himself, and suddenly Dream remembered the way he had treated him earlier and winced, regret adding to the confusing cocktail of emotions in his chest.

A slightly uncomfortable moment passed before George sighed, dropping his arms. "Okay.

Up.”

Dream blinked at him in a sort of haze. “Huh?”

“I’m gonna check your armor,” George said, motioning him up. “I’m not taking the fall if these assholes decide to make your chestplate fly off or something. Get up.”

That made Dream laugh, and he pulled himself to his feet as George started checking and resealing the straps on his armor. His movements were sure and focused, and Dream started to relax, feeling George’s focus help him center himself as well. George was doing all he could do to try and protect Dream, the prince thought, and affection fluttered in his chest.

“I didn’t mean to upset you earlier,” he said as George came around front to look at him.

George grabbed Dream’s chestplate and tugged it into place. “It’s okay. I shouldn’t have started talking about it in front of other people.”

“You were right about the Zerians, anyway,” Dream said. “Including the magic. I don’t know how they’re doing it --,”

“I think the one in the stands is casting the spells,” George said, leaning back against the nearby table. “He’s making the other incredibly fast. However quick you think he can move, he can move twice as fast when he needs to.”

Dream nodded. It made sense, and really, he should have guessed they would have magic. Magic and evil went hand-in-hand; he felt it was difficult to find anyone with evil intentions who wasn’t connected to magic in some way. “I’ll just anticipate it.”

“Yeah,” George mumbled. His eyes were full of worry.

“It’ll be okay, George,” Dream said, and he placed a hand on George’s shoulder. “I might not even face him this time. Maybe somebody else will knock him out first. Or I’ll lose.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that’ll happen,” George said, and he wasn’t looking at Dream, but he wasn’t moving away from his hand, either; if anything, Dream felt like George had shifted into his touch just slightly, and the movement felt important, somehow, and the air was thick and quiet between them for a second.

“You’re not dying today, Dream,” George said finally, breaking the tension and causing Dream to pull his hand away self-consciously. “I know that.”

“George?” came a sudden, unfamiliar voice from the entrance to the tent, and suddenly a head was pushing through the flap, causing Dream to sort of jump as a younger servant entered the tent. He flashed an enormously toothy grin at Clay and gave him a little bow, and Clay watched him with increasing bemusement as he started rambling: “Ah, Your High Royalness, sir, forgive the intrusion, I just came to fetch my compatriot, here, because the next round is about to begin, and... well, I wanted to introduce myself as well, sir, one promising young man to another, I have to say, I’m impressed with your... general skill and -,”

“Tommy,” George groaned as Clay flashed him a mystified look. “Shut up.”

“Yes, right, well,” Tommy continued, totally unfazed, “best of luck, Prince Clay, sir, and I’ll be rooting for you from the stands, after my liege, Lord Wilbur, of course, have to keep up appearances, don’t we, but you’re a close second, I assure you. And tell King Danny Boy old Tommy said hello,” and this made him cackle, a ridiculous, ear-splitting sound that followed him

as he exited the tent.

Dream looked after him, windblown, as though a small tornado had just entered and exited the tent. "What... was that."

"That... was Tommy," George said. He pushed himself off of the table and Dream felt a slight surge of worry again, realizing the next event was about to start. As George left, he paused and touched Dream's arm near the elbow.

"Good luck," George said quietly, and then he was gone.

Dream watched him go and wondered why the brief touch hadn't felt like enough.

---

Clay's first few rounds passed in an abstract haze. His opponents were worthy competitors, but they were basic, predictable, and he followed his motions automatically, parrying their blows and knocking them to the ground without much mental effort at all. Every round ended the same way: with his sword aimed at their chest or placed lightly, very lightly, against their neck, and his opponent vocally yielding, usually with a hint (or more) of frustration.

*(Did Clay even have to try? George wondered from the stands. He seemed to move effortlessly, unbothered by heat or danger. His skill was entrancing.)*

At the end of every round, like the end of every round that day, Clay resisted the urge to glance at his father for approval, knowing he would see what he always did: a stoic face, betraying nothing. It was not going to be easy to win a seat on the Court today, he knew. Winning the joust was a good first step, but the loss in the melee was significant.

Hand-to-hand combat, though, was his way to prove himself once and for all. Above and beyond the other events, it was the most prestigious, the easiest way to win a good name for yourself – even if you didn't end up victorious. It was also the only event all the competitors tended to watch, grouped in a crowd near the edge of the stands.

The pillager was winning, Clay noted with frustration. (The pillager was winning, George noted with a growing sense of dread.) He would have to face him soon. The other competitors were being eliminated, one by one. Sapnap was bested by Lord Wilbur, who Clay vaguely connected to the strange child who had entered his tent earlier.

*(George just barely managed to stop Tommy from trash-talking Sapnap as he left the field. "What did I say, Tommy. No child executions today.")*

Wilbur was Clay's penultimate opponent. He was a worthy opponent, and clearly very smart, forcing Clay to put his full effort towards the fight. He was taller and older than Clay, using his natural advantage against the prince, who had to make up for it by anticipating Wilbur's actions and seizing the gaps in his defense. Wilbur was slower on his left side, Clay realized, and he played to Wilbur's left, forcing him back. Their fight lasted twice as long as any of Clay's other rounds, but by the end Clay managed to gain the upper hand, tripping Wilbur and knocking him to the ground in a final burst of energy.

*(George failed to hide a satisfied smirk which drove Tommy absolutely crazy, sent him to muttering "oi, big man, watch yourself, or it's gonna be me and you, one on one, soon as this is*

done, I swear...")

At last, it was the final round, and – as though it were ever going to be anything else – Clay found himself facing the man from Zeria across the field.

(The crowd fell silent. The final round of the Tournament. The Prince of Camelot. The totally unknown stranger. The pillager's face twisted into a tiny grin as he adjusted his grip on his sword and George's chest clenched. This) was it. Clay set his stance and waited for the starting drum.

As soon as it sounded, the Zerian rushed at him with inhuman speed, and Clay was only barely able to drag his sword up to block his first blow, remembering with a sudden lurch that the last time he had faced the man one-on-one, Sappnap had had to save him. Determined not to make the same mistakes, Clay recalculated the man's speed in his head, and the next time the Zerian swung, Clay's shield was there to meet the blow, his sword already swinging in an arc towards the man's side and knocking him directly across the ribs.

The man was pushed back a step, suddenly put on the defensive, and Clay took the advantage, striking again and again, forcing him back on his heels, forced to block Clay's hits without having a chance to get another strike in. Vaguely, he could hear cheers and murmurs in the background, but that was just noise, a distraction from his all-consuming focus.

He swung again but this one was poorly aimed; it glanced harmlessly off the man's shield and suddenly the Zerian was snaking in for a strike that hit a little too closely to the gap in Clay's armor, forcing him back a step. His balance was off and the man's eyes widened, his expression wild, as he went for another hit, and then another. He was only picking up speed, and Clay suddenly felt panicked as the man's sword swung in an incredibly fast arc – he felt it nick the front of his helmet –

("Come on," George whispered as he watched the pillager taking deadly swipes at Clay, Clay only barely dodging them, "come on, come on..." His magic practically caught flame in his hands, screaming at him to move, but he had to wait, he had to keep his promise until the last second possible – )

*He's fast, he's smart, but he's not that strong.* The fact suddenly became clear to Clay and he looked for the next opportunity to use it. The Zerian swiped his sword overhead, but Clay brought his own sword up to block the hit, and then he barreled down on the man, basically taking him in a one-on-one strength contest. It wasn't his usual fight style, and it seemed to take the Zerian by surprise, as the man dropped his shield to hold his sword with two hands, struggling under the force of the blow –

As the man faltered, Clay pushed their swords to the side and immediately rammed his full weight into his opponent, sending him flying to the ground, his sword knocked away. Clay immediately brought the tip of his sword to the man's neck.

"Do you yield," he said, gasping for air.

The Zerian was also panting, and his face twisted into something utterly hateful, something that chilled Clay down to his bones, before he spit to the side.

(George clenched his jaw and he heard many people in the stands murmur in confusion.)

*"Do you yield,"* Clay grit out again.

The Zerian's face fell into a much calmer, colder expression. "I yield," he finally said.

Just like that, the arena exploded into cheers. Clay removed his sword from the man's throat and extended a hand to help him up, but the man ignored him, pushing himself up to a sitting position.

(George watched the tattooed pillager and the pillager on the field look at each other as Clay walked away, holding his sword up with one hand and waving to the crowd triumphantly with the other. Clay removed his helmet and his face looked utterly exhausted but full of pride. He started to make his way towards his father's booth –

But the pillager was finally getting to his feet behind him, and with that inhuman speed, George saw him reach for his discarded sword. George leapt to his feet as the Zerian raced towards Clay, his motions muffled by the sound of the crowd's roar, and instinctively, George threw his magic in a desperate, unfocused push towards Clay's head, hissing, "*Dream –*")

**TURN AROUND**, said a voice in Clay's head, as loudly as if someone had screamed in his ear, and he did, and there was a sword coming down in an arc that would cleave through his head –

he threw himself to the side, hitting the ground, and the blade just barely missed him, nicking the top of his ear. Clay heard the crowd gasp and a few people scream but all he could do was desperately pull up his sword and block the next strike from the Zerian man, his face now totally deranged, as he slashed at Clay again and again.

"Just – fucking – die," he thought he heard the man grunting under his breath, and Clay's mind scrambled frantically for something, some maneuver he could pull, but he was pinned to the ground, and his arms were growing weaker –

Suddenly the man froze, his face, his actions, everything, and he stared down at Clay with wide, shocked eyes.

He fell to the side with a choked gasp and Clay saw Sarnap standing behind him, his sword dripping with blood from where it had just struck Clay's attacker. Sarnap looked alarmed and angry, but he moved surely, leaning down and wrenching the sword from the Zerian man's injured grasp.

"What the hell just happened," Sarnap said as he reached out a hand to Clay.

"I have no idea," Clay said, mostly honestly, as he grabbed his arm and got to his feet, taking a ragged breath of air.

(The crowd was going absolutely crazy, some people standing and cheering for the two Camelotian knights, others confused, upset, shouting at each other and at the field. George looked frantically for the tattooed pillager, but he had disappeared entirely. Tommy was rambling, talking a mile a minute: "I knew something was up with that man, he did not look right, he did not look right at all. What the HELL just happened, I mean seriously what the HELL just happened --" And then the King stood and people started to fall quiet, and Daniel spoke:)

"Friends and neighbors, please," Clay's father said, and Clay turned to see him standing in his booth, commanding the space and causing the spectators to fall quiet. "It is clear that we have had an imposter with less than honorable intentions among us today."

*Understatement of the century*, Clay thought, watching as a few Knights picked the pillager up by his arms and dragged him away from the arena. He knew his father was merely trying to

preserve calm, and peace between the present Kingdoms.

“Let this not distract us from the displays of strength and bravery we have witnessed here today,” Daniel continued, and the crowd broke into nervous, appreciative applause. Clay looked around and saw the rest of the competitors joining him and Sapnap in the center of the field. Several of them clapped him on the shoulder, offering him words of support.

The deadly threat of the pillager put to rest, Clay was suddenly free to remember his original anxiety. The choosing of the knights.

Daniel disappeared from his booth and reappeared in front of the competitors. He looked as regal and imposing as ever.

“This is not something I expected to do today,” he said, more to himself than anyone else, and Clay’s heart skipped in his chest. “Prince Clay.”

Clay stepped forward, and could barely process what was happening; the world felt unreal, and he felt his heartbeat pick up as his father said, “I don’t think there’s a person in this audience who can say I am unfairly favoring you with this honor today. You have proven yourself in strength, character, and bravery. It would honor Camelot to receive you into our court.”

Clay moved on autopilot as he knelt in front of his father, bowing his head deferentially. “I accept,” he said, his words ringing strange in his ears. *I did it, I did it, I DID IT.*

*(He did it. George’s heart swelled twice its size.)*

Then his father spoke another name, and things became even more surreal as Sapnap knelt next to Clay, his eyes wide and shocked.

“More important than individual bravery is trust and loyalty to each other,” his father was saying. “By receiving you both into the Knights of Camelot, you will each have something rare: a comrade to fight alongside you, to support and protect you.”

*(And George couldn’t help it, he was so happy for his friends but he couldn’t help the spark of bitterness and jealousy. Clay already had someone like that. He always had. But nobody knew it. Not even the prince himself.)*

Sapnap accepted his invitation and then the ceremony was over as quickly, and strangely, as it had begun. Clay stood as the crowd roared and cheered with applause. He tried to contain his excitement, but couldn’t stop himself from throwing his fists in the air, beaming and reveling in the moment, in the feeling of finally achieving the goal of his life so far.

Immediately, he was swamped with people, first competitors and then spectators. He felt like he was moving through water as dozens of people at a time came up to him to speak with him, to shake his hand or clap his shoulder. He was carried through the tide, barely registering any faces and fewer words, responding as best he could, unable to wipe the grin from his face but starting to feel overwhelmed with the noise and the unwelcome feeling of closeness as people packed in all around him.

Finally he caught a glimpse of a safe haven, pushed his way into his tent, and yanked the strings to close the tent flaps firmly behind him, taking his first clean gulp of air since before the final round had started.

He turned around, and there was George.

He looked relieved and delighted, crossing his arms and just shaking his head slightly. And Dream felt a genuine smile break across his face.

He spread his arms. "What did I tell you?"

George scoffed and rolled his eyes. "You are such an idiot," he said, and then he was moving forward and crushing Dream in a hug.

This was a kind of closeness that was welcome, and Dream hugged him back just as tightly, spinning him around a little and wheezing with laughter. "I did it, I fucking did it!" he said, knowing George would allow him that unfiltered celebration.

"You did it," George said, breaking away, his face pink. His next words were more serious. "That was way too close for comfort, though."

"I know," Dream said, thinking he would be vividly remembering that brush of steel against his ear for a long time to come, and touching the cut that had been left there as a reminder. "I know."

George's eyes were bright, but a small frown crossed his face. "The second man disappeared," he said quietly. "I don't know where he went."

Dream shook his head. "It doesn't matter. If he comes back, we'll be ready. And we don't have to wait around for him to strike this time."

George nodded in relief as a familiar shout boomed from outside. "CLAY! Get your ass out here so we can celebrate!" Sappnap – *Sir Sappnap* – shouted, sounding happier than Clay had ever heard him. "George! Clay! Where are you!!" he heard Bad shout as well.

George and Dream grinned at each other and George made a move for the entrance, but Dream pulled up short. "Wait," he said, grabbing George's arm for a second.

"What's wrong?"

"On the field," Dream started, and then stopped again. George looked at him in concern, but Dream was suddenly unsure what to say, unsure why he had even brought it up. What was he about to say?

*There was a voice in my head – and it sounded like you?*

"Nothing," he eventually said, "nevermind." George had a strange expression on his face, but Dream just ruffled his hair, drawing a familiar splutter from his friend. "Let's go celebrate."

The two of them walked into the sea of people side by side.

---

The night was pitch black, the new moon swamping Mercia in total darkness, when the Circle finally met a few days later.

They had called an emergency meeting. Almost immediately. The events of the Tournament had not only *not* gone as planned – they had basically backfired in every way possible.



Well – *nearly* every way possible.

“This had better be worth the travel,” one of the cloaked men grumbled. Thirteen of them were gathered in the Mercian cavern that made up their usual meeting spot – hardly a distinguished gathering place, but necessary for their current level of secrecy. A few flickering torches lit the space, and each figure was dressed in a dark cloak, mostly obscuring their faces. In the middle of the cavern stood a large stone table.

“If what Malcolm says is true, it most certainly will be,” said a woman who stood at the head of the table. She spoke with a lilting accent, her face framed with long, silver hair. Behind her stood an unusual figure, unfamiliar to the group, gaunt and somewhat scrappy compared to the regal qualities of the other members. He had an unseemly tattoo around his right eye.

Finally, footsteps announced the arrival of their final member as Malcolm appeared at the mouth of the cave.

“Malcolm,” the woman said, her voice echoing softly. “You have your witness?”

“I do,” the man said, and he stepped aside to reveal his guest.

Tommy slowly stepped into view of the Circle. His eyes were wide, his face slightly terrified. He looked, for once, as though he had finally realized he had gotten himself in over his head. He hadn't meant to get himself involved in... whatever was happening here. He had just told his teacher, Malcolm, a few too many details about his new friends from Camelot.

“Tell them what you told me,” Malcolm said, pushing Tommy forward a little bit.

Tommy cleared his throat nervously. “Well, sirs, and madams, it’s a pleasure to meet you, um... well, you see, it’s not like I was trying to be a snoop, I just...”

“It’s okay, Tommy,” the silver-haired woman said, and Tommy balked. “Just tell us what it is you saw.”

He hesitated before speaking succinctly for once. “George. The prince’s servant. He has magic. I saw him use it to warn Prince Clay during the competition.”

The cloaked members glanced at each other. “Surprising,” one murmured, “but not impossible.”

“Why any self-respecting sorcerer would *serve* in Daniel’s house...” another muttered, shaking her head.

“That in itself is not why I brought you here,” Malcolm said, turning back to Tommy, who almost visibly gulped.

“I... I didn’t know why this was important, but Malcolm said...” Tommy trailed off and refocused. “I heard him. A few times. He called Prince Clay by a, a nickname or something.”

“What nickname?” the woman asked.

Tommy shifted uncertainly. “He called him Dream.”

The word cast a deathly silence over the gathered members. Tommy looked anxious, and he tried to continue: “they weren’t a bad lot, really, they were actually quite nice -” but at this, Malcolm placed a hand on his shoulder firmly, silencing him. Luckily, nobody was paying

attention to him anymore; their gazes were focused solely on Minx, who turned to look at the pillager behind her.

“Leave,” she said coolly. “Your failure will not be held against you. There were larger forces at play.”

The man narrowed his eyes, but left quietly, disappearing into the night. Shortly thereafter, Malcolm whispered something to Tommy, and he scampered away as well.

Minx took a deep breath as the sorcerers were finally left alone, and she leaned forward onto the table. “If this is true, then Prince Clay is even more dangerous than we thought. He has got to go.”

The group murmured in unified assent.

“What of the servant boy?” Malcolm spoke up. “He is protecting the Prince. That is a significant complication.”

Minx's eyes flashed and her lips narrowed into a thin line. “He's still young. And he's one of us,” she eventually said, looking around the group. “He could be a great asset.”

“And if he doesn't?”

“Then he will have chosen his side,” Minx said, and the coldness in her voice was enough to chill the air. “And he will accept the consequences.”

## Chapter End Notes

oof

this chapter got hard to get through, but I kept to my timeline!! it got soooo long, I just needed SPACE to set a bunch of stuff up! i am going to stick to sunday uploads from here on out.

see you all next week, with a chapter i've been looking forward to for ages --



## eighteen, pt. 1

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### *eighteen*

The news rode into Camelot at sundown in the form of a man on horseback. At the entrance to the castle, he dismounted, speaking urgently to the knights guarding the gates. After exchanging meaningful looks, one knight opened the gates, while the other escorted the man into the castle.

It was uncommon procedure for an unsolicited visit from a commoner, but this was something the King needed to hear.

A sorcerer had been found in Camelot.

---

Like usual, the servants found out about it first.

Gossip spread like wildfire through the castle. Before the messenger had reached the throne room, the groundsmen had told the chamberservants, who told the kitchen staff, who told the servers, who spread it along to anyone who would listen. Soon, clusters of men and women were whispering about it in every corner of the castle.

A sorcerer. A sorcerer hadn't been found in Camelot in over a decade.

---

King Daniel heard the news shortly after. Though he had retired to his chambers for the night, he reemerged in the Grand Hall, looking slightly disheveled.

The messenger bent his knee and told the King the story in a few rushed sentences: a woman in Henwick, a large village under Camelot's protection, had been caught using magic on her children. (At this, Daniel's nose wrinkled in utter disgust. *Her own children.*) She had been caught by the local guard, and they would transport her to the castle as soon as the morning made it safe to travel.

King Daniel nodded briefly and commended the messenger for his haste, offered him a safe place to stay for the night, and spent the rest of the evening pacing his quarters, stroking his beard, his mind churning.

He took no pleasure in eliminating magic users from his land. Daniel did not consider himself to be a sadistic man – merely realistic. He had seen the utter havoc magic could wreak on a kingdom, and he was determined to protect Camelot from such a fate.

He had made it clear, over and over, to his citizens, what the punishment for magic would be. Tomorrow, he would be true to his word.

---

George's grandmother, Sylvia, found out only a few moments later.

The young woman who had taken over George's herb-gathering duties found out from her friends at the castle, and when she dropped by Sylvia's house in the evening, she spilled the news in a rush of excited words. She missed the way Sylvia's hands clenched at the news, the way her gaze grew distant and pained. Sylvia stayed quiet and asked her assistant to leave shortly thereafter, ignoring the young woman's confused expression.

Once she was gone, Sylvia sat heavily at the table, trying to keep her hands from shaking.

She remembered the last time a sorcerer had been put to death in Camelot.

She remembered it every time she closed her eyes.

After letting a moment of dread pass by, Sylvia's concern focused in a far more particularized direction. She sighed deeply and pressed her hands into her forehead briefly.

"He's ready," she told herself. "He has to be."

---

The two people who most needed to hear the news were two of the last to receive it. Mostly because they were slightly drunk, and completely engrossed in a game of darts.

"He's gonna choke," Clay was saying from the table, to a group of snickering knights. "He always does. Watch."

"I'm not gonna choke," George grumbled, focusing intently on the cork dartboard hanging on the tavern wall.

"Hurry *up*, George, we don't have all night," Sappnap taunted from his side, having already taken his turn. The knight was smirking, casually tossing a dart from hand to hand as George ignored him and threw his first dart.

Bullseye. Sappnap protested, "beginner's luck," as George turned and raised his eyebrows at the table. "What was that, Clay?"

Clay rolled his eyes as George turned and took aim again – but maybe Sappnap was right, because his second shot was nowhere near as good as his first, and his third dart glanced off the side of the board, cementing his loss. George tilted his head back and groaned in exasperation as Sappnap clapped loudly and whooped, returning to the table victorious.

"This is so stupid," George muttered as he fell back into his chair. Callahan, the tall, mostly silent knight who was sitting next to him, offered him a conciliatory smile while the boisterous Eret boomed "ah, don't worry, George, I'll get you another drink," standing to move towards the bar.

Clay, sitting directly across from him, had a merciless smirk on his face. "Told you," he said smugly, leaning forward.

"Shut up, Clay."

"Aww, George, you're so cute when you're angry," Clay teased, just to fluster George, who was annoyed to feel it work as his heart stuttered awkwardly in his chest.

"You know what, Clay," he said, trying to barrel past the comment, "enough. You and me. Let's do this."

"Oh man, George," said Ponk, a bearded, darker-skinned knight from the end of the table. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Yeah, George, definitely not a good idea," Clay repeated, his smugness growing even more intolerable. "I think you've lost enough for the night."

"What's the matter, scared to lose to your servant?" George snarked right back at him, pulling a number of *oohs* from the gathered knights. Clay's grin slipped a bit and his eyes narrowed, satisfying George. It was way too easy to get a rise out of him.

"Fine," Clay said, "but if I win, I'm putting you on stables duty for a week."

"Fine," George retorted, "but if *I* win, you have to do both of our laundry for a *month*."

This cracked up Ponk and Sapnap as Callahan raised an eyebrow at Clay. The prince's face was almost pink, delighting George, and Clay learned over and snatched the darts from Sapnap, who protested weakly.

"Alright, let's go, then," Clay said with bravado, standing and approaching the dart board. He took his usual position as George stood to stand next to him, and George rolled his eyes as Clay started narrating his actions: "see, George, what you always forget is that it's really in the stance. You have to be *consistent*, not just lucky."

It was something that George both loved and hated about Clay in equal measure. The way he was the best at everything – and *knew* he was, and had absolutely no qualms rubbing it in.

So – okay. It wasn't fair for George to do this. It really wasn't. But *Clay never lost*. It was getting ridiculous. And god, George hated stables duty.

And it was just so easy, when Clay let his first dart fly, to use the tiniest bit of magic to nudge it to the right, so that it hit the 6-point wedge rather than the bullseye.

Clay looked confused, and George smiled patronizingly. "That was pretty consistent, Clay," he said in a sarcastically sweet voice, hearing Sapnap giggle from the table. "You think you can hit the middle of the board next time?"

Clay glared at him. "That was just a warm-up."

George lifted his hands in the air and Clay returned his focus to the board, taking a second

longer before throwing another dart.

*Thwip.* Bullseye. (George had to let it be believable.)

“There we go,” Clay muttered under his breath, “two in a row, come on,” and brought the third dart to bear, green eyes narrowing in focus. George couldn’t help but feel a mixture of annoyance and affection at how seriously Clay took these games, *all the time*, and really felt like the prince could use a dose of humility, which is why he adjusted the third dart’s arc just a little bit again so that it embedded itself on the 5 point wedge.

Eret, Sapnap and Ponk all dissolved into laughter, while Callahan took a surreptitious sip of his drink. Now, Clay looked actually frustrated, but he tried to save face, crossing his arms and turning to George.

“Okay, not my best round, but never underestimate George’s ability to choke,” he said, sweeping his arm out in invitation.

That really sealed the deal. George stood in front of the board and told each of his darts exactly where he’d like them to go.

*Thwip. Thwip. Thwip.* Bullseye. Bullseye. Bullseye.

“WHAT THE HELL,” Clay shouted as the table absolutely erupted, Sapnap banging his fist against the table with glee while Eret and Ponk roared with laughter. Clay crossed his arms, his forehead wrinkling in a little scowl. “There’s no way you didn’t just cheat,” he said.

“Aww, Clay,” George said, “you’re so cute when you’re angry,” and was utterly delighted to see Clay go fully pink under his freckles.

Before their little back-and-forth could go any further, the door to the tavern swung open, and another member of the royal guard – a familiar face, his name was Fundy, he often joined them when he wasn’t working night shift – made a beeline for the group of knights. The table slowly quieted when they saw the man’s serious expression. He was clearly not coming to join in their fun.

“Prince Clay,” he said, “your father is requesting your presence in the Grand Hall.”

Clay looked taken aback, but he nodded, placing his darts down on the table. “I’ll be right there.”

Fundy dipped his head and left quickly, and the group exchanged quiet glances.

“Well, sorry, George,” Clay finally sighed, grabbing his jacket, “but I guess we’ll just have to call it a wash.”

“What?!” George exclaimed. “But I won!”

“Everyone knows wagers are best two out of three,” Clay said, because of course he would. “I’ll see you guys later.”

As Clay left the tavern, George sat and crossed his arms, watching the doors swing shut behind him with a tinge of worry. It was rare for Clay to be summoned to his father’s side like that, especially this late.

“Don’t worry, George,” Sapnap said through a mouthful of tavern peanuts. “Clay’s just

being a sore loser, as usual.”

“Yeah, whatever,” George said, pulling himself out of his thoughts. “I feel kinda sorry for him, it must be hard to be so bad at everything.”

This pulled a laugh from the table, which brought a genuine smile to George’s lips. He didn’t know all the knights as well as Clay and Sapnap did, but they treated him as an equal, despite their pretty vast difference in status, and he felt comfortable around them.

His mind felt tugged towards the castle, though, as Clay marched through the chilly autumn evening towards the Grand Hall.

---

George left the tavern soon under the pretense of going to bed, and was stoking a small fire to life in Dream’s room when the doors swung open and the prince entered. He looked a little surprised to see George.

“Did the others leave so early?” Dream asked, shrugging his jacket off and draping it over a chair.

“No, I just got tired from beating you so badly,” George joked, but Dream didn’t take the bait. Instead, he collapsed onto his back on his bed with a soft groan, rubbing his face and scrubbing through his hair with his hands.

Not for the first time, George felt him distracted by the attractive way Dream moved as he stretched his arms over his head without an inch of self-consciousness, his back arching up from the bed a little as he yawned. Even sprawled out on the bed, looking exhausted, Dream had this natural grace about him, his long limbs moving fluidly.

George felt a small rush of heat in his stomach and quickly snapped his gaze back towards the fire, embarrassed. He had these thoughts... somewhat frequently, more frequently than he would like to admit. They were distracting, and unimportant, he scolded himself internally, and tried to ignore the way his heart skipped half a beat as Dream rolled over on his side, his head propped up on his elbow, his hand in his disheveled hair, inspecting what George was doing.

“What did your father want?” George asked, trying to move past the moment.

Dream’s face went serious. He had tired lines at the corners of his eyes, and his forehead was softly furrowed. “A trial is being held tomorrow.”

George’s eyebrows lifted slightly. A trial wasn’t unheard of, but it wasn’t especially common. He turned a little, still sitting in front of the fire, and brought one knee to his chest. “What happened?”

“A sorcerer was caught in Henwick,” Dream said, and looked up to meet George’s gaze just as the servant had to race to keep his face from falling. It clearly didn’t work perfectly, as the prince caught his distraught expression, but he just nodded gravely. “Yeah. I know.”

“Do you know what happened?” George asked, fighting to keep his voice from trembling.



“No,” Dream said. “He didn’t give me any details. I don’t know if he even knows what happened. They’re coming tomorrow, and we’ll hold trial. And then we’ll have the execution.”

George’s heart sunk like lead into his stomach and he lost his breath for a moment. When he regained it, he asked, “how can you say that already? What if the person is innocent?”

“You don’t get accused of sorcery if you’re innocent, George,” Dream said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Then what’s the point of the trial?”

“We have to hear the evidence, it’s how things are done. There’s always a chance the execution won’t happen, but George, I’d be *really* surprised. There’s no room for magic in Camelot. There can never be. You know this.”

George’s heart hammered loudly in his chest and he swallowed. “I know,” he said weakly, trying to keep a hold on himself.

Dream sighed, seemingly oblivious to George’s internal panic, and fell back on the bed, staring up at his ceiling. “Tomorrow is going to be a really long day.”

George stood and bit his lip, utterly unsure of what to do. He didn’t want to leave. But he didn’t know what he wanted to say. Or what he *could* say.

“Do you want me to come to the trial tomorrow?” was what he came up with. He had accompanied Dream to several trials and court sessions previously, helping to fetch anything the King might need throughout the process.

George wasn’t sure whether he wanted Dream to say yes or no, but he didn’t have much of a choice when the prince said “yes, definitely. This is... this is pretty new to me. You’ll be helpful during, but I’d also like another person’s perspective after it’s over.”

George nodded, feeling his throat sort of thicken. “Okay. Of course.”

“Thanks, George,” Dream said. He glanced at George and then looked concern at George’s expression, so he pushed himself up to a sitting position and said, “George, don’t be afraid, okay? The sorcerer is under constant surveillance. She won’t get away.”

Dream was worried about him, and George knew he should feel touched. But he was worried for exactly the wrong reason, and it just made him feel sick to his stomach. So he just nodded quickly and said, “yes, I know. Thanks, Dream. I – I think I’m gonna go to bed now. Unless you need anything else.”

Dream still looked worried, but he shook his head no, and George left abruptly, throwing a quick “goodnight” over his shoulder.

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he managed to make it to his room before breaking down.

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Sylvia knew the midnight knock at the door would come hours before it did. She had stayed awake to wait for it.

When she opened the door and saw her grandson standing, tear-stricken, in front of her, she knew he had heard the news.

Quickly, he was seated at the fireplace, wrapped in a blanket and given a warm cup of tea. She saw George's shoulders still shaking, either from the chill of the autumn night or from the shock of the news or both, and she bit the inside of her lip as she sat in the armchair adjacent to his, cradling her own cup of tea.

"I don't know what to do, Gran," George said hoarsely, after a long moment of looking into the fire.

Sylvia noticed, once more, what a fine young man her grandson had grown to be. At eighteen, he was somewhat shorter than his friends, but he held himself proudly, with a quiet confidence in the way he carried himself that was entirely deserved. For the past four years, he had been practicing his magic with her, and she was utterly astonished at the pace at which he was learning. Already, he was a better sorcerer than many men twice his age. His understanding of magic was intuitive, spiritual rather than merely intellectual. It was intertwined with his soul, a part of him since birth. He treated magic with reverence and appreciation, rather than the greed and malice with which lesser men often approached it. He knew it to be an art form, rather than a weapon. And his time at the castle had instilled him with a fine work ethic, a sense of perspective and humility. He had served his and Prince Clay's dual destinies with care, protecting the man he was sure would grow to be an incredible king.

Sylvia couldn't have been prouder of him. And she couldn't be more scared that every day, he walked into the jaws of the kingdom that would crush him with impunity given the chance.

"I can't stop thinking about mum and dad," George finally whispered, blinking down at his tea.

"Of course not," Sylvia responded, her voice trembling. "I can't, either."

"I know I wasn't there," George said, twisting his hands around the cup, "but... I don't know. It feels like I was. I have... flashes."

Sylvia winced.

"Can you tell me again how it happened?" George finally asked, looking up. His dark eyes looked upset and vulnerable. "I was trying to remember the details, but it's been so long."

Sylvia's heart twisted in her chest. "George... I don't know if I should."

"Please, I..." George took a steadying breath and drew himself up a little. "I want to know."

She wouldn't tell him that it hurt her every time she talked about it, too. George's mother was her child, her baby. Reliving the memory was incredibly painful. But Sylvia was the only carrier of this memory, and she had a duty to him to pass it down. George had been so young, far too young to comprehend what was happening to him. She still remembered him, his wide, dark eyes, his tiny voice, asking questions with no easy answers...

She could answer him, now.

“We all knew of Daniel’s disposition towards magic,” she started, and saw George pull the blanket a little tighter around his shoulders. “So when he became King... most of us became careful. Secretive. Several of us who openly practiced magic decided to move villages, change our names. It was all... we hoped it was an overreaction. We hoped we were overestimating the depth of his distrust.

“It started small. Restrictions on public magic. Asking people to register themselves as sorcerers. Some of us did... others didn’t. Nobody knew what to do, or who to trust.

“But your mother wouldn’t have any of it,” and at this Sylvia smiled wryly down at her hands, remembering her daughter: her wild mane of black hair, her flashing dark eyes and wickedly sharp tongue. “Like you, her magic was inborn and inescapable. She couldn’t simply stop doing magic. It would be like asking someone to put aside speaking, or breathing.

“So she refused – all of it. Refused to go into hiding, refused to register, refused to stop practicing magic in public. She helped people – that was all. She was a healer, like me, but better,” Sylvia laughed quietly, “much better. And your father – well; he was her helper. And although he was afraid, mostly for you,” she glanced at George, “because you were so young, he knew who he married. And he was by her side for every moment.”

She took a shaky sip of her tea. George’s eyes were focused on the floor. She could tell he was drinking in every word. “Things got worse,” she said, and then stopped. How could she even explain it? The way everything had moved so gradually, and then so quickly all at once. “Things got much worse.

“There were many more restrictions placed upon magic, so many laws. Eventually sorcerers couldn’t take two steps without being arrested for it. Placed in dungeons, or exiled. And what could any of us do about it? Daniel was the King, divinely ordained. He was looking out for the best interests of his kingdom, he said.

“The magic users got angry. They started discussing solutions. Several people wanted to flee to Mercia, but Mercia wasn’t much better in those days. Others refused to leave their home. A small – but vocal faction wanted to fight. To make clear we wouldn’t be passive. And maybe... maybe there was a way we could have done it. Maybe there was something that could have worked.

“But they did it all wrong. It was unorganized, desperate fighting. After a few outbreaks of violence, Daniel started putting to death any sorcerer who was involved. Except – he would just take everyone. Every sorcerer in an entire village that had seen violence – gone. Just like that. Burned.

“People were angry, and getting angrier. Their family members had been taken from them, innocent loved ones. And at that point they didn’t want justice. They wanted revenge.

“A few managed to infiltrate the castle. I still don’t understand what they wanted – or what their purpose was. But they killed the Queen. They almost killed the Prince,” Sylvia said, and saw George’s brow furrow.

“That was the last of it. Magic was outlawed permanently. Daniel promised to put any person who practiced magic in Camelot to death. It was chaos. Known sorcerers being arrested left and right. Executed within hours. They told us if we stopped using magic immediately, we would be spared, but that was a lie. They would take anyone they could find. Anyone they thought might become a threat.

“Your mother tried to stop them. She turned herself in willingly and begged for an audience with the King. She implored him to see that not every sorcerer was evil. She believed – she believed that she could speak to him, believed that he had a good heart.

“But whatever heart Daniel had before the Queen’s murder had been crushed that day. He was an angry and powerful man, the most dangerous combination. He was not reasonable. Not acting rationally. He was deranged and grieving, and he wouldn’t listen.

“She burned the next morning,” Sylvia ended, her voice tapering into a whisper. “Your father refused to renounce her, and was put by her side. Until the end.”

She saw tears slipping quietly down George’s cheeks.

“I came to find you,” she continued softly, “and brought you here. I had managed to hide, and nobody knew who I was. Or who you were. I kept you here. And once every sorcerer they could find was gone... things went quiet.”

She left a few things out. The way the executions had gone on in front of the castle for weeks, acrid smoke filling the sky. The way Daniel would watch every one, his face like carved stone, from the castle balcony, his hands held behind his back. The way she could hear the cries and the sound of the roaring flames from her house, unable to drown them out. The way she had kept George hidden away in the back room, pieces of cloth stuffed into his ears, for the hours when the pyres burned every day.

Sylvia placed her cup on the table beside her and then clasped her shaking hands together.

George was quiet. He wasn’t crying anymore. The fireplace crackled softly and illuminated his face in an orange glow. Sylvia couldn’t read his expression.

“I can’t let him do it again,” George eventually said. His voice was quiet but strong. Convicted. “Not even to one more person.”

“What are you going to do?” Sylvia asked. She wished she could tell him what the right answer was.

George looked down at his cup, still mostly full and long gone cold. He tapped a finger against it and fresh steam rose up; he took a fortifying sip. “I’m going to get Dream to stop it.”

“How? Have his feelings towards magic shifted at all?” It was George’s second mission, and the one he had encountered the most trouble with. Daniel’s prejudice seemed deeply ingrained in Clay’s mind, through no real fault of the prince’s. Indoctrination was a difficult demon to exorcise.

George’s forehead furrowed. “No. Not really. But... maybe facing down the reality of putting someone to death will change his mind. Maybe if I confront him about it, really confront him, he’ll see that it’s wrong.”

Worry bloomed in her chest. “George... if anyone can stop this, you can. And I know have to try. I *want* you to try. But please, promise me something.”

“Anything, gran,” he said immediately, meeting her gaze.

Sylvia looked at him tenderly. “If you’re not sure,” she said, “*absolutely* sure, that he’ll take your side... don’t reveal your magic.”

George hesitated, his face clouding. “What if that’s the only thing that’ll change his mind?” he asked softly. “I have to tell him at some point. I’ve been lying for... for years. For our whole lives.”

“Do you know for a fact,” she said, “that if you told him today, he would stop Daniel from putting you to death?”

George’s eyes widened in shock before he looked away. Sylvia could tell he wanted to say yes, but he struggled with his answer for a long moment. “I don’t... I don’t know,” he said, and his voice broke a little. “I hope he would.”

*Your mother hoped, too.* “I want you to be certain,” Sylvia said, nearly pleading. “I can’t...”

*I can’t watch it happen to you.*

She didn’t have to say it. George heard her meaning. He met her gaze again and he nodded. He told her, “I won’t tell him unless I’m certain, gran. I promise.”

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The Grand Hall never felt more solemn than it did during a trial. They were very rare. The magistrates usually took care of petty squabbles. The only cases that reached the King were serious and complicated offenses – those matters which implicated the security of Camelot.

Clay felt the nervous energy immediately as he entered the room, the late afternoon light filling the Hall with golden shafts of light. His father was sitting in his throne, his elbows resting on his knees and his hands pressed to his mouth. He was staring forward into space and barely acknowledged Clay as his son took his place in the seat at his side.

To his right sat many of Daniel’s advisors, the noblemen and women he consulted in times of war and conflict. To his left stood the Knights, their hands crossed in front of them.

Clay looked at Sarnap but the knight was standing at strict attention, his gaze held forward. They had different roles here, a difference that lingered between Clay and the rest of his friends. In times like this, their role was clearly defined: they were present to observe and to protect the king. The advisors, too, understood their place; they knew when their voice was welcomed and when it was not.

Clay’s role was different and more complicated. He was almost an advisor to his father, but almost a symbolic figurehead, powerless. He was there to watch, to bear witness; to fulfill his role as a prince, to learn how to administer justice when he was king. But did he have a voice in the present moment? Clay wasn’t sure.

He glanced to his left and saw George, standing behind the knights, practically blending into the shadows far against the wall. They made eye contact and George gave Clay a small, nervous smile. Clay mirrored it back to him, fortified by his presence. No matter what happened today, he’d be able to talk to George about it later. George would support him; he would understand.

“Bring her in,” Daniel spoke, and everyone fell totally still. Sir Eret, standing nearest the doors, opened them, and the sorcerer was brought in.

Whatever Clay thought a sorcerer would look like, it wasn't this. It was a woman, short and slight of frame, dressed in a white shirt and a plain brown dress. She had dark skin and her hair hung in curls around her face. She didn't look terrifying or ethereal; she didn't look angry; though she did look strong, walking into the Hall with sure-footed steps. She was flanked by four fully-armored guards, and her hands were tied behind her. If Clay hadn't known she was a sorcerer, he would have laughed at the overkill. They marched her into the Hall and presented her to the king.

You could have heard a pin drop for a long moment. The sheer size of the hall seemed to intensify the silence into a kind of roar.

"Who accuses this woman?" Daniel said, and the tone of his voice sent a shiver racketing down Clay's spine. It was controlled in a deadly way. He wasn't shouting, but his voice held barbs that could slice through steel.

Another man, a villager, approached from behind the guard. He was tall and pale, with a scraggly beard and a set of clothes that were almost nice, but betrayed his class. He approached the king and removed his hat, bowing in a deep motion.

"Your Highness," he said, and Clay noticed the sorcerer's eyes narrow the instant he spoke. "My name is Geoffrey of Henwick. I am your humble servant."

"You have accused this woman of sorcery?" Daniel asked, not losing the razor-sharp edge in his voice.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Explain yourself."

"Your Highness, I am the foremost physician of our village," Geoffrey started, having obviously rehearsed his speech, delivering it like he was in a play. "About a fortnight ago, this woman – Cecily – called me to her home to treat a sick child. I arrived to find a house full of sickness. Yellow fever."

Clay winced. The deadly illness had spread like wildfire throughout many villages. It could wipe out entire families in the span of a few days.

"I did everything I could, but all three of her children had caught fever, and each greatly deteriorated," Geoffrey said, his voice dripping with what Clay read as manufactured sadness. "I applied a number of natural remedies and attempted to remove the fever through the letting of blood, as we now know is the best way to eliminate fever."

"You may skip the medical details," Daniel said coldly, and Geoffrey blanched.

"Yes, sir, I –" he cleared his throat. "The children were dying. I thought they may only have a number of hours left. But the next day, I returned to their home and all three had made a miraculous recovery. Perfectly healthy. Your Highness, I have seen many things in my time as a physician, but never – *never* – have I seen three children sick with fever return from the verge of death so quickly. I began to suspect that the woman may have used some unnatural remedy to treat her children. When I entered her home, I found this –," and here he presented a book, leather-bound and worn through, "in her kitchen."

Daniel motioned for the book and it was brought to him. Clay took a glance at the pages. It was full of incomprehensible scribbles, a strange and terrifying language that struck fear right down to his bones.

“I informed the royal guard, and they seized her yesterday evening,” Geoffrey finished, and then waited expectantly.

Daniel flipped through a few pages of the book. “Do you deny these accusations?” he finally said, and though he didn’t specifically address the question or look up from the book, it was clear who was expected to answer.

Nevertheless, a long silence stretched before the sorcerer finally spoke.

“No,” she said, and Clay looked at her in shock. Her voice was soft, though it held conviction. Her face was calm.

Daniel hesitated in his next page turn. He looked up at the sorcerer, who held his gaze unflinchingly. His brow started to furrow in anger. “You know the penalty for sorcery in Camelot?”

“I do,” she responded, her chin lifted high.

Clay didn’t know what to think. She was so... so different, from what he had thought she would be like; and then he realized he wasn’t quite sure what he had thought she would be like at all, but he anticipated some sort of strange markings, or bizarre dress, or at least a hint of malice in her voice or in her gaze. This woman had none of those. She looked, by all means, to be a common villager, a mother – not the image of a sorcerer Clay had built in his head. And the thing was accused of doing... was healing her children?

Daniel closed his book and Clay felt that sure his father felt the same way he did. That this couldn’t be right. That there must have been some mistake. He waited for his father to echo the sentiment.

“You have been found guilty of sorcery,” Daniel said, his voice carrying the resounding finality of a decree, and Clay jolted in his seat. “You will be kept in the dungeons tonight, and you will be executed in the morning, as the laws of this land require. This is my judgement.”

Daniel stood and Clay felt himself numbly rising to his feet as well, along with the rest of the room. The guards closed back in around the sorcerer, whose face had gone pale, but whose expression remained stoic, and grabbed her by the arms, leading her away and towards the dungeons.

She said nothing. She didn’t plead for mercy. She didn’t ask for them to understand. She just went, her head still held high. Her shoulders set.

Clay’s thoughts stalled to a stop. He felt disconnected from reality, and wondered if he was dreaming. If he hadn’t woken up at all, and George would be pulling him out of bed soon.

But his father’s hand on his shoulder grounded him. He looked at King Daniel, who stared seriously into his eyes, searching for something. Something Clay didn’t know if he had.

“There is no room for magic in Camelot,” the king said, like a mantra.

He felt himself nodding, unable to bring himself to speak, and then his father was leaving, dismissing his court. The matter warranted no further discussion.

The rest of the room left without fanfare, but when Clay looked to his right, he saw the same shocked expression on George’s face that resonated within his own chest. His friend stared at the place where the woman had stood only moments prior with a pale, slightly horrified

expression. And Clay's mind spun.

There was no room for magic in Camelot.

It was true. It had to be true. So this had to be right.

Why didn't it feel that way?

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Blood rushed in George's ears as he followed Dream back to the prince's quarters. They didn't speak as they walked, silence echoing louder than words ever could. Dream's shoulders were rigid, his head tilted down.

Dream had been useless, George realized, and felt anger and shame rising up in his chest like hot water boiling over. The prince had done nothing. He had just sat there, silently, watching as Daniel sentenced that mother – a mother who had merely healed her own children – to death. Without a second thought.

And Dream had said nothing.

George felt bitter, he felt bitter and he felt betrayed, but mostly he felt angry at himself, angry that he had failed, that he hadn't even begun to change Dream's mind about magic. George had been a coward. He had been afraid to push his luck, too content to slip into his easy life, to protect Dream and enjoy the comforts of the castle and take refuge in the prince's company without ever taking risks. Shame filled him as he remembered the way Cecily had stood so calmly, accepting her punishment with grace and courage unlike anything he had ever seen.

George's job was to stand up for his people, and he had failed.

It had to end today.

The doors to Dream's quarters shut behind them and Dream collapsed into a chair with a shaky sigh, putting his head in his hands. Evening was encroaching, and the light in the room was soft and blue.

George stood totally still by the closed doors, unable to take another step forward.

"That was insane," Dream mumbled into his hands.

George's gaze snapped towards him sharply, hoping the words meant what he wanted them to mean. "It was."

"She didn't even..." Dream shook her head. "That was nothing like what I thought it would be."

George took a deep breath. "So... what are you planning to do about it?"

Dream stiffened, and then he looked up at George. His expression was confused, and George's heart sank. "What do you mean?"

"Dream," George said urgently, "you've got to stop this."



“What are you talking about?” Dream said sharply. “She’s a sorcerer, George. There is no room for magic in -,”

“Don’t feed me that --” George waved his hand through the air, cutting Dream’s words off. “Don’t feed me that line. Seriously, Dream. That woman was *helping her children*. You really think she deserves to die for that?”

He could see the guilt in Dream’s eyes, he could see the indecision there, but it was clouded over and crowded out by that indoctrination, that deep-ingrained programming. “You don’t understand, George,” he said, standing and pacing away, towards the windows. “It’s not about what she *did* with the magic. It’s the fact that she used magic in the first place. You can’t let sorcerers have anything, George. You - you give them an inch, and they take root before you have a chance at stopping them,” he said, and it sounded like he was reciting something by heart. “Have you heard what’s happening in Mercia?”

George had heard the rumors. “This isn’t Mercia.”

“It could be,” Dream snapped, turning, and now he looked angry. “Easily, it could be. The only reason it’s *not* is because we have a king who will actually stand against magic. Who actually cares about his citizens’ safety.”

“That woman wasn’t a citizen?” George argued, throwing an arm back and towards the door. “You’re telling me *that woman* wasn’t *exactly* like every Camelot citizen you’ve ever helped? What about *her* safety?”

Dream hesitated, but his scowl grew. “Maybe she was a citizen, once,” he said coldly, “but she recounted that when she chose magic. When she chose to learn it, and practice it, in secret, *knowing* it’s against our laws, *knowing* what the penalty is, *knowing* that it threatens our kingdom --,”

“I actually can’t believe you right now,” George said, his voice rising almost to a shout. His heart hammered in his ears. He had hoped Dream would see injustice, would hesitate to execute a real person, and – and he had been handed the most innocent human being *possible*, and he still couldn’t see –

“I kind of can’t believe *you* right now, George,” Dream was saying, his voice rising as well. “Since when are you so friendly towards sorcerers?”

The words were dangerous and George’s mouth snapped shut, his blood running cold in his veins. “This isn’t about me,” he said, even though it was, it was, and Dream just – just didn’t know it, didn’t know his every word was cutting right down to the marrow. “It’s about a woman who obviously hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“Magic *is* wrong. It’s *inherently* wrong,” Dream snapped. George’s heart broke from the words, and to hear Dream’s voice hold that contempt, that cruelty, that George had long wanted to attribute only to Daniel. It seemed wrong, a perversion of Dream’s usual voice, as the prince continued, “It’s. Evil. It corrupts people. *Every* time.”

“What about healing her children of sickness is *inherently wrong*?” George said desperately. “That woman did nothing to deserve punishment. And you’re going to let her be *put to death*, Dream.”

“It’s – I’m not *letting* anything happen to anyone,” Dream hissed, stalking up to George until they were only inches away from each other and shoving a finger at him. “It’s not even my

decision! It's my father's decision!"

"So, what? You'll just stand by and let it happen?" George said harshly. "You didn't say a thing during that trial. You just... you just stood there!"

"What is it that you *want* me to do, George, actually? You want me to contradict him in front of everyone? You want me to go up to him and challenge him on the one thing he'll never change his mind about?"

"YES!" George practically shouted, and Dream's eyes widened. "Yes, yes, damn it, Dream! That's *exactly* what you should do. You're the *Crown Prince*. You think your word means nothing? If there's ever a time to stand up to the King, it's now! When he's about to burn a woman alive for *healing her children*."

"My father has lived through this once before," Dream hissed. "He's seen what magic can do to a kingdom. Nothing I say will make a difference. And maybe – maybe nothing should! Maybe he's right, have you ever thought about that, George? Maybe he knows something you don't."

"Maybe, Dream," George said, clenching his hands into fists. "But maybe he's *wrong*. Can you bring yourself to admit that? I think you know that woman doesn't deserve to die for this. Do you trust your father more than you trust what *you know* to be the truth?"

Dream's eyes widened and flashed with some emotion George couldn't identify, but it dissolved quickly into something dark and dangerous. "You're forgetting who you're talking to, George," he said, his voice quiet and lashed with anger.

"Who *am* I talking to, Dream?" George snapped back before he could stop himself. "Tell me."

Dream's gaze flickered between George's eyes. George held the stare, noticing the dangerous edge glinting in Clay's eyes but unwilling to back down. Still, as Dream opened his mouth to speak, George remembered something important. Something that scared him.

Clay never lost.

"You got it right, first time, George," Clay said, and his voice held that same quiet malice that George had just heard in Daniel's voice, and it drove a cold slice of dread into the center of his chest. "I'm the Crown Prince of Camelot. You have *no idea*, George. *No idea* what it's like to make these kinds of decisions. And you never will. So maybe you should remember your *place* when you're talking to me."

The words washed over George like a sudden bucket of icy water, shocking his thoughts into a standstill. His mind went fuzzy with hurt. Clay's gaze was arrogant as he turned his back on George, as if the argument had been resolved, but George let rage rush through him and pour out through his mouth.

"Why do you think I do this, Clay? You think I enjoy washing your clothes and fetching your meals and shoveling the shit out of the stables?" he said, his voice bitter. "You think I like sitting around and listening to you complain about how hard it is to have life handed to you on a silver platter?" Here, he saw Clay's shoulders stiffen, and he felt a cold bolt of satisfaction to know he had hurt Clay in a similar place as Clay had hurt George. "No, Clay. I do this because despite how stubborn you are, despite what a total asshole you are, there are times when I think I see something else. Someone better. Someone who could be a great king. A fair one. A king who cares

about his people. Who wants to help them, and not just exploit them. And I want to help *that* Clay. But this?" George laughed shortly. "This isn't that person. This is someone who's vindictive and cruel and just – just making the same *stupid mistakes* his father did."

It was the wrong thing to say, or maybe the right one. George wasn't sure anymore whether he was speaking to get through to Clay or just to hurt him. But his last sentence must have done both, because Clay whirled, and his face was a mask of anger.

"If that's how you feel, maybe you should leave," the prince spat.

The words hit George like a truck, and he stopped for a second. Clay's face didn't change.

"Really, Clay?" George asked quietly.

"Really," he responded.

Never. Never before had they argued, *actually* argued, without resolving things. But as George caught his breath, he saw the impasse. He saw that nothing he said would get through to Clay like this. And he saw that he wouldn't be able to move past it, either. He couldn't just go back to fetching Clay's things. To staying silent. He couldn't stay and watch it happen.

George turned and left the room.

The doors slammed shut behind him with a sort of finality, and George froze in the hallway, barely breathing so as not to make a sound.

He waited. Waited for something. Waited for Dream to shout out to him, asking him to come back. Waited for an apology. Or at least a continued argument. An indication that Dream hadn't really made up his mind.

Nothing came. Just silence that stretched on and on. Just George, the servant, standing powerlessly outside of Prince Clay's room.

Eventually, it became clear there was nothing to wait for. George took a shaky breath and walked away.

Chapter End Notes

to be continued...

I hoped to post the entirety of this section at once, but I didn't have enough time to finish the second part to my liking! I want to make sure and nail the next section, so I'm taking another week to finish it up. rest assured this is not the end of this part of the story.

can't tell you all how much your comments meant to me last chapter, and motivate me to keep writing! seriously, they are a huge bright spot in a very bad quarantine for me, so thank you to everyone who leaves comments!! <3

see you next week!!

## eighteen, pt. 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Clay stood at his desk, gripping the edge of the table tightly.

A storm raged inside of his chest – a hurricane. He had felt like this before. Felt angry. Confused. But he had always been able to manage it.

Now, his emotions felt out of control.

For a moment, he wasn't sure what he was going to do. He felt like throwing something, maybe, or destroying something. Just to make the outside look the way he felt on the inside. But before he could do anything stupid, an image outside his window caught his eye. He watched George lead Daisy from the stables, jump on her back, and ride through the castle gates into the darkening night.

The sight startled him. He sat down heavily at his desk, the image filling up his mind and momentarily quieting the storm.

George left, like Clay had told him to. Was he leaving for good?

*Let him go*, a bitter, retributive voice in his head hissed. *You can find a servant who's twice as good, and half as irritating.*

But the instant he let himself actually picture a world without George by his side, that sentiment crumbled away like sand.

George was special. He was smart. Smarter than people gave him credit for. He was incredibly brave. Every time Clay got himself in a scrape, George threw himself in right alongside him, even though he had no real way to defend himself. He had an incredibly good heart. He cared about everything and everyone, even animals, to a degree Clay sometimes found ridiculous, but always endearing.

There was nobody else like George, not to Clay. His being Clay's servant was just a technicality. The idea of *replacing* him was – was laughable.

And Clay had just told him to leave.

*But you had to*, Clay told himself, his mind spinning again, the storm starting up and swirling his thoughts into gusts. George had been defending *magic*. He had been irrational, had been saying dangerous things. What else was Clay supposed to do?

The inherent evil of magic was something Clay knew to be true. Fundamentally. Deep down, in the parts of himself that never changed. He knew his duty was to protect the things he cared most about: his family, his friends, and above all, Camelot. He also knew that magic

threatened Camelot. Every time. Without exception. Therefore, his duty was to eliminate magic.

But apparently, George believed differently. Didn't that count for something? Didn't it count that Clay, himself, had seen a gray area? Had hesitated when looking into that woman's eyes?

*What if George is right?* he thought, and even putting that sentiment into words felt terrifying. It was questioning a premise he had accepted unquestioningly for his entire life. It was challenging his father's bedrock beliefs. It was acknowledging that, all this time, for all these years, Clay might have been wrong.

His mother's words echoed softly in his head. *You know truth, Clay.*

He didn't know what the truth was in this moment. His father and George, two people he trusted implicitly, had looked at the same woman, had heard the same words, and had left with entirely different minds. Clay had left torn between the two. Directly in the middle.

Clay needed to see the sorcerer again, for himself. Needed to talk to her. Surely, he must have missed something about her – something that would unlock the answer, something that would confirm to him that his father was being rational, rather than tyrannical. That he hadn't based his worldview on a lie. He felt himself stand and move towards the doors, propelled forward by the steady drum of his heartbeat in his ears.

He only had tonight to figure this out for himself. By the time morning came, it would be too late.

---

The cold evening air whipped against George's face and through his hair as he urged Daisy on faster through the forest, stinging his eyes and distracting him from the emotion bubbling up in his chest.

He was running away. He was being a coward. *Again.*

But Clay had told him to leave, and he just... he just needed to go. He couldn't be in that castle. Couldn't go to bed knowing a sorcerer was locked away in the dungeon. Couldn't face his grandmother again, having failed.

And what else could he do? Brute-magic his way through the royal guard to release Cecily? Force himself into exile, or more likely, onto a pyre?

*Maybe a better man would,* George thought. Maybe he would, still. But not right now. He needed some time to think.

Daisy seemed to be following a path through the forest known only to her, and he trusted her and let her lead as the night grew darker, until suddenly they were emerging from the treeline into an open space and George saw the lake he had visited in his boyhood, shimmering with moonlight. His breath caught in his throat as Daisy slowed to a walk, the wind rustling softly in the trees.

"Good girl," George whispered as he hopped off, patting Daisy on the shoulder. He started to walk towards the water, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

Soft ripples ran along the surface of the lake, making the reflection of the moon shiver in its center. George looked around him but saw nobody, as usual, just the tall branches of trees reaching towards the sky and swaying slowly in the breeze. Across the lake, he saw the rocks where he had once laid out with Dream in the sun, the treeline where the bandits had emerged all those years ago. It was the first time George had used his magic to protect Dream, the first of a series of moments that Dream had never known about. Might never know about.

His hands itched and his mind raced with thoughts he couldn't quiet, and he decided to do something he rarely let himself indulge in. He decided to take his magic for a spin.

George wandered closer to the forest to gather a few branches, hoping to try out a new vocal spell he had been practicing in his free time. Gathering a few sticks together, he set them aflame with a flick of his wrist, coaxing the flame until it licked up the branches and dissolved them into embers.

Placing his hands over the sparks and focusing his mind on the result he wanted, George took a breath and whispered in the Old Language: **“upastiye drakon.”**

The embers swirled to life under his hands and flew into the air above the lake, and as George kept careful control over their flight, they rearranged themselves into the form of a dragon, stretching towards the sky. Delighted, George tried to push the embers a little further to get the dragon to roar, but here he lost his control over the sparks and they dissipated into the night.

George exhaled and dropped his hands, resolving to practice more. This spell was more about tact than pure strength. He could have surged forward with all his magic, but – the embers just would have gone out. It was like his gran said: it was easier to destroy than to create with magic.

*Like anything.* That was the important end to the phrase. *Like anything.* Magic was no ethically distinct from a sword, or a rock for that matter. They could all be used to hurt. They could all be used to help.

George looked down at his hands and clenched them into fists a few times, feeling the sparks in his fingers and repeating it to himself.

*You're not evil. You're not. And this isn't wrong.*

“That was cute,” came a voice from behind him, and George whirled, sudden panic cracking through him like a lightning bolt.

A woman stood behind him, observing him closely.

He had been seen.

---

Clay had about two thousand second thoughts as he made his way to the dungeons, but before any could take hold, he was descending into the lowest level of the castle. He never had reason to visit the dungeons, and the damp stone corridors lit by flickering torches seemed unfamiliar and unwelcoming as he neared the heavy wooden door which led to the sorcerer's cell.

Pushing it open, he saw Ponk and Callahan jumping to attention, having been put on first

watch. When they saw Clay, they relaxed slightly.

“Is everything alright?” Ponk asked. Callahan looked attentive and concerned.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Clay assured him. “I need to talk to the prisoner. Alone.”

Ponk and Callahan glanced at each other, and then into the cell. The bars to the cell were made of heavy wrought iron, and through them, Clay caught a glimpse of the sorcerer. She sat on the floor in the corner, her hands and feet chained, leaning against the stone wall.

“Okay,” Ponk eventually said, as Callahan shrugged. “I guess that’s fine. We’ll stand right outside. Shout if you need us.”

“Thank you,” Clay said as his friends nodded and left the dungeon, the door shutting behind them. He walked slowly towards the bars of the sorcerer’s cell, stopping about a foot away.

The sorcerer kept her gaze fixed on the opposite wall. Her face looked lined with exhaustion. She didn’t look otherworldly. Didn’t look ethereal. Didn’t look like anything except a woman huddled in the corner of a cell. Clay grit his teeth.

“My name is Clay,” he said, breaking the silence. “I wanted to talk to you.”

The sorcerer glanced at him briefly. Her gaze was appraising.

“If you try anything,” Clay warned, “there are two guards waiting just outside.”

“I’m not going to do anything,” the sorcerer said, lifting her chains and tilting her head towards the bars of the cell. She had an interesting voice, sort of husky and strong. “I don’t know any spells that can break through iron.”

Clay narrowed his eyes and crossed his arms. “You could still do something else,” he muttered.

“Like what,” she said, raising an eyebrow. “Turn you green? Give you warts?”

Was that a joke? Clay didn’t laugh. “I don’t know,” he said defensively. “I don’t know what – what sorcerers like you do to people.”

She actually rolled her eyes at that. “Am I the first sorcerer you’ve ever spoken to?” she asked.

“Yes,” Clay said with certainty. “I don’t keep company with traitors.”

“Then I don’t blame you for not knowing that we’re just normal people,” Cecily said, pulling her legs a little closer to her body, “and normal people generally don’t like hurting other people randomly. So. You’re safe.”

Clay bit the inside of his lip. He wasn’t blind. He could see what this situation would look like to an outsider. His father was putting this woman to death, and yet she wasn’t lifting a finger against Clay. Wasn’t even raising her voice.

“Why are you here?” the woman asked. She seemed tired.

“I don’t really know,” Clay said. “Except that a friend of mine seems to think... well, I don’t know what he thinks. That you’re innocent? That I should let you go?”



“Interesting,” the woman said, her gaze thoughtful.

There had to be a trick. There had to be something Clay couldn’t see here. There had to be more than a helpless person stoically accepting her fate. Whatever confirmation Clay was looking for that Daniel was in the right, he hadn’t found it yet. And it freaked him out.

“Okay, drop the act. What’s your game?” he snapped, glaring at the sorcerer. “Seriously. You must be planning *something*.”

"What makes you think that?"

"You're - you're so *calm*, it's like you don't even care you're about to die. Why didn't you defend yourself at the trial?"

She met his gaze levelly. “Would it have mattered?”

“You could have tried, at least,” Clay said, avoiding the question. “At this point it feels like you have a death wish.”

A dark look flashed across her face and her forehead furrowed into a soft glare. “It wouldn’t have mattered,” she answered her own question. “I knew the law. I knew what would happen the minute I healed my kids. I did it anyway. I don’t feel like embarrassing myself begging for mercy I won’t get.”

“So you’ll just sit there quietly until tomorrow morning?” Clay said angrily. “I’m not that naïve.”

“Maybe you are,” she responded, matching his volume. “Have you ever had something you would give your life for, Prince Clay?”

The words stopped him in his tracks. “Yes,” he said finally, his arms falling to his side, his hands balling into fists. “I would give my life to keep my kingdom safe.”

The sorcerer nodded slowly, keeping her eyes on Clay. “That’s what they say about you,” she said softly. The words sent a shiver of surprise down Clay’s spine. “They say you’re different from your father. That you care about the people.”

“Of course I do,” Clay muttered.

The sorcerer just kind of hummed noncommittally. “If you do feel that way... maybe you can understand. You think there’s anything I wouldn’t do to keep my children safe? You’re wrong. I die tomorrow. So what?” She shrugged. “They’re home safe, right now. Alive. Breathing. So I say fair trade. Done deal.” She made a motion like she was brushing her hands off, and then returned her gaze to the stone wall. But when she spoke next, her voice kind of trembled, betraying the fact that she wasn’t as stoic as she seemed. “Now if you’re done trying to convince yourself I’m some evil demon, or something, I’d like to spend my last night with my thoughts, instead of nursing your feelings, *Your Highness*.”

The words shook Clay, threatening to throw him off-balance. Because they seemed true. But there had to be more here, there *had* to be. “I trust my father more than I trust you,” Clay said, shoving a finger at the woman. “And I’m not different from him. There has to be a reason for this.”

“Whatever you say,” the woman sighed, but as Clay turned and stalked away from the cell, she said, “but you *are* different, no matter what you think.”

“And why is that?” Clay threw over his shoulder.

“You came here, didn’t you?”

Clay stopped still at the door, his heart racing. He felt the sorcerer’s eyes on his back.

He didn’t turn. He pushed through the door and waved off Ponk and Callahan.

He needed to talk to his father.

---

The voice that had startled George belonged to a woman with a pale face and long, silver hair. She wore a dark blue cloak that swept behind her as she walked steadily towards George, stopping a few paces away.

George took a defensive step back, his hands balling into fists. “Who are you?” he asked warily. His mind scrambled for an excuse but found none even worth trying. *Oh, that whole magic dragon thing? – yeah, total coincidence –*

But the woman didn’t look afraid of him. Instead, she looked supremely interested. Her eyes were strangely light, probably blue? – but in the night, they looked almost white. Her face was cunning and she gave George a broad, sharp smile.

“My name is Minx,” she said. “Don’t worry. I don’t bite. Much.”

Minx lifted her hand and conjured sparks from mid-air, silently blowing a similar ember-dragon to life. This one, unlike George’s, was animated; it flapped its wings as it flew several loops around George before arcing up towards the sky, breathing out flame and then scattering to the wind.

George’s heart caught in his throat, and he looked at the woman with large, wild eyes.

“You’re magic,” he breathed, both relieved and shocked. Aside from his grandmother, and Cecily in the dungeons, he had never met another magic user. Especially not one who seemed close to his age.

“Not just magic,” Minx responded, her eyes glittering. She had an unfamiliar accent, and her voice held a strange, enchanting lilt. “An elemental. Just like you, George.”

George laughed in utter disbelief before double-taking. “Sorry... how do you know my name?”

“I’ve heard of you,” she said, taking a step towards him. “I’ve been meaning to meet with you.”

“And... why is that?”

“I have a plan that I think you’ll want to hear. A plan to bring power back to sorcerers in Camelot,” she said, and then, perhaps picking up on the way George’s eyes started to narrow, quickly followed with, “and a plan to save the woman scheduled to burn tomorrow.”

This gave George pause, and though he heard distant alarm bells ringing in his head, his

desperation for a solution that might help Cecily drowned them out. “Well... what's your plan?”

Minx smirked and motioned for George to follow her. He fell into step beside her as she started to walk around the lake. She slipped a hand through his arm, holding him at the crook of his elbow and throwing him slightly off-guard as she started to speak.

“You heard’ve what’s happening in Mercia, George?”

“Only rumors,” George mumbled, glancing at Minx. She was beautiful, in a strange, wild sort of way. Her smirk lingered on her lips, and her eyes were bright and focused on something in the distance.

“Tell me what you know,” she said.

“That the government is crumbling,” he said, thinking back to all the stories he had whispered heard around the castle. “That magic is going completely unrestricted. That sorcerers are gaining more and more power.”

Minx chuckled. “Good. That’s what we *want* all the little people to know. But it’s not the whole story. That part’s *much* more interesting.”

“What is the whole story?”

“The story is the Circle,” Minx breathed, and then launched into an account of a world George had never known.

The Circle was a sorcerer’s guild that had survived for decades, throughout the purges and the repression, operating secretly and always with the intention of protecting sorcerers in Albion. It was a small group, made up of an elite few who had retained powerful positions in various kingdoms. Nobles with magic blood, advisors with hidden practices. A slight majority of them resided in Mercia, hence their initial attempts at legalizing magic the straight-forward way, Minx explained with a wince, referring to the Mercian decision which had almost led to war with Camelot some years ago.

“No matter how many times we try, no matter how many ways, we never make any progress,” Minx said, her jaw working with frustration. “Most kings are too cowardly to risk their throne by allowing people to possess power they can’t control, the greedy bastards. And any time we do make progress, King Asshole of Camelot swoops in and erases it with a single threat. We began to realize something. Something big. Something no sorcerer in Albion can deny any longer.”

“What is that?” George asked, his mouth dry.

Minx stopped and grabbed George's shoulders, physically turning him so he was looking directly at her. “As long as non-sorcerers rule in Albion,” she said firmly, her pale eyes flickering over George’s face, “we will *never* be free. Never.”

“I... I don’t think that has to be true,” George stuttered.

“I know you think that,” Minx said matter-of-factly. “Because you think Prince Clay will unite Albion.”

George's stomach dropped twenty floors. “How do you know that?” he breathed.

“Prophecies are boring, honestly,” Minx said, rolling her eyes. “They’re so *predictable*. And oracles are such hacks. I don’t believe in prophecy, George. I don’t believe in fate. I believe in

grasping your life by the horns and *dragging* it where *you* want it to go. None of us are ruled by destiny unless we let it rule us. And I am not putting my destiny in the hands of some ego-inflated pretty boy from Camelot.”

The words stung, and George pulled away, shaking his head. “You don’t know Clay. He’s just like the prophecies say, he’s good and kind and fair. He’ll be a great King.”

“Oh, that’s *good*, that’s *so* good to hear,” Minx said sweetly. “So I assume that means he’ll be stalling the execution?”

George stopped, and his face drained of color.

“That’s what I thought,” Minx said. She swept her cloak behind her as she continued her walk along the lake, letting George trail behind her. “Daniel’s corrupted Clay far too thoroughly. He’ll never accept magic. Never.”

Her words were striking a chord inside George that he didn’t want to play, a thought he had always hoped was an anxious fear and not the truth. He wanted to see a future where Dream could accept magic, but he felt like that future was growing less and less likely by the day, and that worry gnawed a deep, empty hole in his chest.

“Then what’s the solution?” George asked, trying to keep up with Minx’s quick-moving trains of thought. “The prophecies say Clay is the only way to restore magic to Albion.”

“Wrong!” Minx crowed, turning quickly and shoving a finger in George’s face. “Wrong, George. They say it’s *one* way. Not the *only* way. And I have another one. A better one.”

“Which is?”

“We take control instead,” Minx said, a manic smile on her lips. “Sorcerers rule. No more kings and kingdoms. No divine rule. We take control of Albion and restore magic ourselves, with *our own hands*. We’re more than powerful enough, George. We just need to *do it*. We just need to strike, as *one*. Once we’ve overthrown every King, we can take charge and lead this land into the greatest era it’s ever known.”

“That’s... that’s crazy,” George stammered.

“All great ideas are, George.” Minx surged forward and grabbed his hands, clasping them in her own. “I know this is new to you, but imagine it, George. Imagine a world where *we* make the rules. No more groveling for acceptance. No more hiding. A world where having magic makes you *powerful*, not persecuted. Just *think* of what that might look like.”

And for a moment, he did.

He imagined Cecily walking free, going home to her children, happy and healthy.

He imagined his grandmother using her remedies to help others, saving people from illnesses that would otherwise kill them.

He imagined sorcerers using magic to protect crops, eliminating famine, feeding the hungry people of their villages.

He imagined defending the kingdom from outside threats with his magic. Using it openly. Being seen as an equal, as the threat he really was. As the *person* he really was.

It sent a shiver down his spine. It was something he thought about often, usually in the context of the distant future – of Clay’s eventual ascent to the throne. It was a vision that had once been strong, but that had grown weaker and weaker as time went on and Clay stayed resistant to the idea of magic.

But Minx was talking about soon. *Now*. And George wouldn’t have to wait for Clay to see the truth.

*You can grasp your life by the horns*, she had said.

“I... I’m interested,” he said, seeing Minx’s eyes light up. “Of course I’m interested. I’m tired of hiding. But... what is it that you’re planning to do?”

A slow, sharp smile spread across Minx’s face. “The Circle’s totally infiltrated Mercia,” she said, her voice quiet and intense. “We’re ready to take it over at the drop of a hat. But we’re waiting. We’re waiting for the right moment.”

“When will that be?”

“We need people ready to act in every kingdom. We need to take over each one at the same time, or we’ll end up with a war we might not be able to win. But we’re missing someone, George. We’re missing you.”

“Me?” George asked, hesitancy filling his chest.

“We have nobody in Camelot,” she said, pointing a finger in the direction of the castle. “We thought it was impenetrable. We thought war with Camelot was inevitable. And we’re not ready for that. Not yet. But with you –,” and she pressed forward even closer, bringing their joined hands up, making George step back slightly with a small flush – “with you, we can act soon. We can do this *right*. No unnecessary deaths.”

“You still haven’t told me what it is you want me to *do*,” George said, his brow furrowing.

Minx hesitated, and sighed, nodding. “I won’t sugarcoat it, George. I won’t.” But she waited a moment longer, working her bottom lip with her teeth.

The pause set off alarm bells in George’s head. “Tell me,” he demanded, pulling his hands away.

Minx set her shoulders. Her eyes held a manic gleam as she said, “There can be no more kings in Camelot.”

“What do you mean?”

“Every claim to the throne must be destroyed. It’s the only way to establish a new world. A *better* one.”

Sudden horror clawed at George’s throat. “You mean –,”

“They all have to die.”

---

The doors to Daniel's quarters rose in front of Clay like great wooden tombstones. He swallowed nervously. Clay rarely came here without being summoned, but this was important. His father would have the answers to the questions now ringing louder than church bells in Clay's mind. He would be able to explain things.

Summoning his courage, Clay knocked on the door.

"Who's here?" came the gruff call.

"It's Clay."

After a pause, the doors opened. His father was still dressed, though his hair was slightly mussed and, uncommonly, he wasn't wearing his crown.

"Is something wrong?" Daniel asked.

"No," Clay said, "well, yes," and felt foolish. "Can I come in?"

Daniel furrowed his brow but opened the door to beckon him inside.

Daniel's quarters looked much like Clay's, though larger and somehow emptier. A healthy fire roared in the hearth. His bed looked untouched. Several scrolls lay scattered on the table.

"Tell me what's on your mind," Daniel said, and Clay turned to face him. His father had his arms crossed, and his eyebrows were raised expectantly.

Clay took a deep breath. "I... I can't stop thinking about the trial."

Daniel nodded heavily. "I would expect that."

"It was so different from what I thought it was going to be," Clay rushed, his words spilling out all at once. "I don't know *what* I expected, but it wasn't *that*. She seemed so *normal*! She didn't seem evil at all, she seemed – she just seemed normal," he repeated, shaking his head. "And... I guess I just don't understand."

Daniel nodded again and moved to sit in one of the chairs in front of the fire, motioning for Clay to sit in the other. "You're right, Clay. Today was... very disconcerting."

Clay felt a rush of relief. His father *did* know how he was feeling. "Yes. Exactly."

"It is disturbing," Daniel continued gravely, "how easily evil serpents can disguise themselves as innocents."

Clay blinked at him, uncomprehending.

"That sorcerer was possibly one of the most malicious I've ever seen," Daniel continued in a murmur. He was staring into the fire, and the flames reflected in his eyes made them look alight with hatred. "The way she confessed so easily to her crimes, as though she were proud of them. And the way she disguised herself as a *mother*. It's chilling to see how easy it is for sorcerers to blend into our midst."

"That's... that's not what I meant at all," Clay said, and Daniel turned his gaze to him, his brow furrowing.

"Then what do you mean?"

Clay's breath caught in his chest for a moment, but – but he had to say this. He had to know if there was an answer. "Father," he said, shifting forward in his seat, "that woman... she didn't do anything wrong."

Something dangerous flashed across Daniel's face.

"She used magic, I know," Clay rushed, "but – but she was just healing her children. I understand we can't allow magic, I know! But executing her? That doesn't seem right."

Daniel didn't speak. He kept his gaze trained on Clay's face.

It utterly unnerved the prince, who forced himself to keep going. "I know you've seen what magic is like up close. And you've told me over and over that there's no gray area in magic. But this – this seems like a gray area! And I just want to know why. Why can't there be nuance? Why does it have to be like this?"

Daniel still stayed silent for the longest time. Eventually, he stood and walked away from Clay, stroking a hand over his graying beard as his heavy steps creaked against the wooden floor. Clay clenched his hands in his lap, hoping for an answer that made sense.

But Daniel didn't answer his question at all. Instead, after pacing several steps away, he stopped and said: "I've failed you, Clay."

Clay blinked. "Wh- what?"

"I've failed you," Daniel said, turning, and his face was angry. "I've tried to teach you about the evils of magic. I've done everything in my power to do so. And you still don't see it."

"No – no, it's not like that," Clay protested, jumping to his feet. "I understand, Father, I do. But this is different."

"It's not different," Daniel argued. "Magic is never different."

"You say that. But why? Why can't it be?" Clay begged. He wanted Daniel to explain. He *wanted* to believe him.

Daniel just shook his head. "I'm disappointed in you, Clay," he said, and it made Clay's heart sink like stone. "I would think your mother's death would be enough for you, but I suppose you need more? Do you need *me* to die, as well?"

Clay felt sick to his stomach, but even through the hurt his father's words inflicted on him, he could still see something true. Daniel wasn't being fair. Clay wasn't even disagreeing with him. He was just asking questions. Clay didn't deserve to be told he was a *disappointment* for that. He deserved to be able to question his father.

"My mother's death has nothing to do with this," Clay said quietly, trying desperately to keep his voice from shaking. "And I want you to answer my question. You say magic is inherently evil. *Why?* What makes *that woman* evil?"

The rage was etching itself deeper into Daniel's face, and his shoulders were rigid. He stood there, staring Clay down, for a long moment. Clay held his ground.

It was in that moment of silence that it finally dawned on Clay. Daniel wouldn't answer his question because he couldn't. There wasn't an answer.

“Who is putting these ideas into your head?” Daniel said instead, and a chill went through Clay. “Someone must be.”

“Nobody's putting anything into my head,” Clay deflected, but Daniel ignored him, pushing past him and grabbing some of the scrolls on his table, practically tearing it apart as he searched for something.

“Surely it couldn't be one of your tutors. I supervised your lessons,” Daniel muttered to himself. “Was it one of the knights?” At this, he whirled, pinning Clay down with his glare. “I'm commanding you to tell me if it was so I can have them expelled from the order.”

“It wasn't a knight,” Clay half-shouted, but his face went pale as he realized his mistake.

“But it was someone,” Daniel said, latching onto the error. Clay watched him with growing horror as he paced forward, shoving a finger in Clay's face. “Who was it? Tell me, Clay. I'm ordering you to tell me.”

Clay swallowed. “It's not important. What's important is that you can't answer me.”

“What's important is that we apparently have a traitor in our midst, a traitor you're willing to protect,” Daniel hissed, and his eyes looked wild and deranged. Suddenly, he stopped, pulling up short. Something seemed to click, and Daniel's voice was deadly as he asked, “was it that servant boy of yours?”

Clay's blood ran cold, but he fought to keep his face neutral as Daniel started to hiss: “I *knew* something was wrong with that boy. Something's been off ever since he came to this castle. And I don't like the way you talk to him. As though he's your equal.”

“He's my friend,” Clay protested.

“No, Clay, he's not. He's your *servant*,” Daniel said. “It was him, wasn't it?”

“Of course not,” Clay snapped, thinking faintly this might have been the first time he had ever outright lied to his father.

Daniel narrowed his eyes, clearly unconvinced. “I don't like him anyway,” Daniel muttered. “You spend too much time with him. Holed up in your room. People will start to get the wrong idea.”

Clay felt dizzy, sick to his stomach. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means,” Daniel muttered. “I don't care what you do in your free time, Clay, but you know you have a duty to this kingdom above all else. And you can't let some little *fling* cloud your judgement.”

At this, something snapped inside of Clay, something deep and fundamental. Something that would never go back to the way it was.

“George has nothing to do with this,” he hissed at his father, rage rising inside of him. “And nobody put this idea in my head except for me, and what I'm seeing with my own eyes. That woman didn't do anything *wrong*. She saved her children from sickness. We shouldn't be putting her to death.”

Daniel grit his teeth and shook his head slowly. “I weep for the day you become king, Clay,” he said, and he might as well have smacked Clay across the face. “Someone has poisoned



your mind with this treachery. But luckily for Camelot, you are not king today. And the sorcerer burns tomorrow. Now you will leave this room before I throw you in the dungeons alongside her.”

Clay was breathing heavily, his hands shaking as he stared his father down.

He had so much more he wanted to say. So many thoughts that were bubbling up from the fractures that had just formed in the foundation of his former beliefs.

He was seeing his father, for the first time, for what he really was. Not an all-knowing, benevolent force. But a man. A flawed, prejudiced man. A man who didn’t have an answer for Clay, because there wasn’t an answer that could justify this execution. There was just hatred.

George was right. He was right about everything.

But Clay also saw, just as clearly, that this fight couldn’t be won here. Not in this room. Not tonight.

So he turned and left, his father's glare burning at the back of his head, letting the tombstone doors close behind him.

He knew what he had to do.

---

Minx’s words were still echoing in George’s ears, ringing almost painfully. *There can be no more kings in Camelot. They all have to die.*

“You’re insane,” George said, shaking his head and taking a few hasty steps backwards, trying to escape Minx’s reach. “You’re actually insane.”

“A purge,” Minx breathed, her eyes gleaming, and she stalked forward with each step George took back, closing the gap. “Like they did to us all those years ago. But we’ll be better, George, we’ll be more careful. Only the royalty, the nobles with claims to the throne, and anyone else who refuses to renounce the old ways. Only those who refuse to recognize our authority. Everyone else can live.”

“You want me to kill Daniel,” George said, and then, horror seizing in his chest, “you – you want me to kill –,”

“I wish I didn’t have to ask you to do this, George,” said Minx, her voice saccharine, “I *know* you care about him, I know you’re friends. But you have to ask yourself, you have to *really ask yourself* how far you’re willing to go for Clay. Are you willing to throw your own people into the fire? Are you willing to throw *yourself* on a pyre? For a man who wouldn’t hesitate to kill you if he knew who you really are?”

George’s heart hammered in his chest, and he shook his head. “No, no, no. D- Clay isn’t like that, he – he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t *do* that.”

“He *is* doing it,” Minx said, her face suddenly going hard. “Tomorrow. To Cecily. You really think you’re special?”

She had hit on that fear again, almost surgically. “He’s – he’s confused,” George argued,

and suddenly he felt water lapping at his heels. Minx had pushed him all the way to the edge of the lake. “He can change. I *know* it.”

“But how many, George,” Minx said softly. She pressed close to him again, grabbing his hands. George felt her nails dig into his wrists. “How many sorcerers will you sacrifice before that happens?”

The words were like knives through George’s chest – but he shook his head, unable to face the mere idea of the other option. “I can’t do it,” he said, pushing Minx back. “I *can’t*. There has to be another way.”

“Oh, there is another way, George, and let me tell you what it is.” Minx’s voice had suddenly gone dangerous, and her face twisted in anger. George’s heart skipped in his chest as he saw the first real glimpse of malice from the sorcerer. “*Endless. War.* Neverending conflict. If we leave a single claim to the throne alive, they will fight and kill and maim their way back to power. It’s how they’re wired. And you know what happens then, George?”

“It’s not -,” George started, but Minx cut him off with a snarl: “What happens then is I cut Clay’s limbs off one by one and leave him to bleed out on the battlefield instead of letting him die peacefully in his bed. And he kills a hundred, or two hundred, or five hundred of our people before that happens.”

The words sent shock waves through George’s body and he stopped still, fully paralyzed by the vicious mask of rage on Minx’s face. His heart pounded loudly in his ears.

“I don’t want war. But I won’t kill Clay,” he finally said, his voice coming out weaker than he wanted it to be. “I *won’t*.”

“Then get me into the castle,” Minx murmured. “I’ll kill him myself. You don’t have to get your pretty hands dirty.”

“No!” George shouted. “That’s not – I won’t let him die, *period*. He’s my friend.”

Minx looked displeased, and her voice was deadly when she spoke again. “Tell me, George. I want to understand why you’re so hung up on this boy. I get it. You’re *pals*. You were kids together. Whatever. But sometimes, you have to make sacrifices for the greater good. And this, *George!* – this is the *greatest* good. So why? Why can’t you give him up?”

George’s breath caught in his throat, and for a moment time seemed to stand still.

Why, indeed? Why couldn’t he?

A series of moments flashed through his mind. Every time Dream had twisted his face in derision when he spoke about magic, his hatred plain in his expression. The countless times George had hidden his crestfallen expression when Dream spoke about sorcerers as though they were lower than dirt. The arrogance and contempt Dream treated him with at times, brushing him off as incompetent, ignoring him in favor of more important friends. The last time they had spoken. Dream’s face, cold with anger. *You should remember your place.*

But just as quickly, and even stronger, George saw every time Dream had stuck up for someone weaker than him, every time he had brought George along even when it wasn’t proper, every time he had thrown himself into a fight and put his own safety on the line to protect someone else. He saw every time Dream looked at him with that soft, fond expression, the way Dream would laugh at his jokes like nobody else did, and sneak him food from his own plate, and – and –

And he saw the visions he had of Dream's future, too, the same vision of a world with magic, a peaceful world, but without the cruelty, without the bloodshed staining the path there that existed in Minx's vision. He saw himself standing alongside Dream in that future. Helping him, fighting with him, building a new world. Being with him. Open, and honest. And loved.

And the strength of his longing for that future made it so that when he tried to imagine actually going through with Minx's plan – actually *killing* Dream – his very spirit rebelled against it, instantly burning the thought to ash.

George believed in Dream's destiny. For that reason, he wouldn't turn against him.

And he also loved him. This he knew bone-deep, and truer than anything.

For that reason, he *couldn't*. Not ever.

"You don't know him," he said, bringing himself back to reality, and meeting Minx's cold gaze. He took a step forward and this time Minx was the one to retreat. "He's not what you think he is. I trust him. I – I care about him. And I won't betray him. *Ever*."

Minx narrowed her eyes. A cold wind blew across the lake, throwing her hood off of her head and tossing her silver hair to the side. "I want you to think about what you're saying, George. You're abandoning your people for the person who *murdered* them." Her voice rose with the wind.

"No," George denied. "Clay didn't kill our people. His father did. I won't punish him for that. I won't help you – help you *wipe out* whoever disagrees with you. That's not the solution. That'll just –,"

His words cut off as his throat closed up, and all of a sudden George couldn't breathe, felt something like a vice around his neck as Minx's eyes flashed a ghostly white. George clawed at his neck and felt something lift him into the air, his feet scrabbling for purchase and then lifting off the ground as Minx rose her hand, glaring at him with a manic intensity.

"You can stop now, because I don't really care," Minx said, her voice reaching a fever pitch as the wind picked up. "I don't care why you like that golden boy so much, and I don't care why you're betraying your people. If you're not with us, you're against us. And against us, you're too much of a liability. Sorry, Georgie."

George choked for air but found none, futilely thrashing against the invisible grip on his throat. Throwing one arm out, he tried to fight against Minx's magic with his own, but doing so bowled him over as he felt power like he had never felt before crackling through the air. He was powerless against it, couldn't even scream, as Minx pressed even harder, bruising the skin on his neck –

He was dying. He was going to die. His struggling started to fade as he felt his vision go dark, the world narrowing to the thump of his heartbeat in his ears, and he heard the distant thought as though it were being yelled into a cavern: *she'll kill Dream next... she'll kill him and I won't be there to...*

At the breaking point, something changed.

George's body, going limp in the air, went suddenly rigid, and a bolt of negative energy

cracked through the clearing, knocking Minx away. The ghostly light faded from her eyes as she gasped for air, looking down at her hand, which tingled with energy.

She looked up just in time to see George, still suspended mid-air, as he opened his eyes.

They glowed with golden light, as though the sun itself had replaced his pupils.

Minx gasped, scrambling backwards before an enormous force slammed against her, throwing her halfway across the clearing. She braced her fall with a cushion of air, but hit her shoulder against the ground as she fell, sending a bolt of pain down her arm.

Minx turned her head and saw George's feet making contact with the ground. His eyes were still golden, his face severe and unfamiliar. He started walking towards her and she scrambled to her feet, retreating. She had never seen anything like this. Only ever heard –

“You'll leave Camelot tonight,” she heard George say, and the sound was strange, as though he was speaking with two voices at once. “You'll return to the Circle. And you'll tell them –,”

and here Minx threw out her own magic, but the force that had so quickly overpowered George before now felt like smashing a pebble against the side of a mountain, and George flicked away her effort with a single hand, leaning in closer as he said:

“Tell them that Dream is protected.”

George thrust his arm forward and Minx was sent flying into the forest, crashing to the ground. She pulled herself to her feet and, after taking one last look back at the clearing, which seemed to be lit up as bright as day, she started to run in the opposite direction. She angrily carved a path for herself through the forest, the foliage drying up and withering under her feet, cursing under her breath.

She wasn't ready for this tonight.

But she would be soon.

When George came to, he was curled up on the damp sand of the beach, water lapping gently at his feet.

Daisy stood above him, neighing softly in concern.

“Hi, girl,” he said, reaching up a hand to pat her on the nose. His arm shook with the effort, and as he pulled himself to his feet, he felt his whole body trembling, sapped of all his energy. His skin was hot and feverish. He glanced around the clearing, but Minx was gone. She had disappeared as quickly as she had arrived. He wondered, vaguely, if she had been a ghost. But when he touched his neck and felt the tender bruises forming there, he knew what had just happened had been all too real.

The golden light, too. George had felt it overcome his body, searing through him; he had barely felt in control as he had pushed Minx away, sent her fleeing into the forest with only a few words and a snap of his wrist. George touched his face, pressed his fingertips into his eyelids, but they felt normal.

He had no idea what had just happened.

The clearing was utterly windless, the lake silent and still, and George felt tears well up in his eyes, his breath quickening as he started to panic. He... he had no idea what he had just done, he had no idea what to do about Minx, about the Circle. Dream was in danger, and Camelot was in danger, and - and it was all out of his control, all descending into chaos...

Daisy neighed again, pulling him out of his spiral, and he patted her shoulder, taking comfort in her steadiness as he felt weak on his feet. "Good girl, Daisy," he said, pressing his forehead against her for a brief moment. Eventually, he gathered his strength and managed to pull himself onto the saddle. "Let's go home."

His stomach felt leaden and heavy as Daisy made her way back towards Camelot, and anxiety still buzzed in his head, but something in his chest also felt different – more certain.

Whatever came next, George had chosen Dream. Once and for all. There was no going back on that.

There was still so much George didn't understand. But that part? That part felt right.

It had to be right.

---

When you grow up in a castle, you get to know every back passage, every forgotten corridor. When you're a kid, you might call them secret passageways. As an adult, they're convenient paths when you don't want anyone to see you.

So it was really no problem for Clay to get Cecily out of the dungeons.

When he had appeared at the cell again, she had looked annoyed, but when he opened the door and removed her chains, her expression had morphed into genuine astonishment, her eyes wide and her face slightly pale. She followed Clay through the small passageway that wound underneath the castle, past the kitchen cellars, and out to the grounds.

He had a horse waiting for her, and a small bag of things she would need for the road.

"You go find your children, and you leave," Clay told her once he had helped her onto the back of the horse. "You won't be safe anywhere in Camelot, so find somewhere else to go. Move *quickly*."

Cecily was openly staring at him, and she hardly even responded, just nodded shortly.

"Okay, well," Clay said awkwardly, patting the horse on the shoulder. "Good luck."

“Why are you doing this?” Cecily blurted out.

Clay took a deep breath. He never imagined being this close to a sorcerer. Let alone helping one escape. “You don’t deserve to die for what you did,” he said, “and the king won’t listen to reason. That’s all.”

Cecily nodded, and in the moonlight, Clay thought he could see her eyes glisten with tears. “Maybe what they say about you is true, Prince Clay,” she said softly. “You are special.”

And then she took up her horse's reins and rode into the darkness.

Clay watched her leave with a strange swirl of emotions in his chest, then took another scan around the empty castle grounds to ensure that nobody had seen him let Cecily out of the side door. It was the same door where he used to meet George when they were children, and the thought struck him as he stared into the forest, down the path leading to George’s grandmother’s house.

George. He had been right about everything. Right about Cecily. Right about Daniel. Right about Clay.

And Clay had dismissed him. Worse – demeaned him. Clay had been cruel, treating George like nothing more than a servant. He flinched at the thought, a terrible, heavy feeling growing in the pit of his stomach. He had messed up. *Badly*.

His urge to talk to George was very strong, but he didn’t know where his friend had gone, and Clay started walking to try and numb the panicked thought that George might never come back.

Had he ruined what he had with George? It was a friendship, a connection that Clay didn’t spend much time thinking about only because it was so much of a given. He and George had barely left each other’s side in years. They told each other *everything*. Things they didn’t tell anyone else. They talked to each other about their parents. Their honest opinions of other people. Their fears and hopes for the future. They had sat talking into the early morning countless nights, sprawled out in Clay’s quarters, utterly comfortable around each other. George made Clay laugh harder than anybody. And he loved making George laugh, loved the way he smiled with his whole face, his eyes crinkling up at the edges.

It wasn’t like what his father had implied, Clay thought, but something rang false about that thought, something that made him feel nervous and slightly dizzy. He and George weren’t – they weren’t *together*. And he didn’t want them to be together. Right?

He cared about George more than he had ever cared about another person. Did that mean –  
...Clay didn’t know what that meant.

He just wanted to find him. Wanted to make it up to him.

After a few minutes, Clay realized the path his feet had taken him down. Knew where he was going. And when he looked up, he saw the pile of smooth stones in the middle of the wooded clearing he and George had frequented so many times as children, glowing softly in the moonlight.

He saw the form of another boy sitting cross-legged at the top.

Relief rushed through Clay like a tidal wave, and he had to stop for a moment to compose himself and gather his thoughts. George was here. He hadn’t left. Clay still had a chance to make this right.

Clay approached the stones, and when he reached the bottom, he called out softly. "Hey, George."

George jumped in surprise and scrambled to his feet, relaxing only slightly when he saw Dream slowly climbing his way to the top of the pile. They stood silently across from each other for a long moment. They were only a few feet apart, yet the space between them felt enormous.

George looked weird, exhausted and slightly harrowed. Dream's gaze scanned George's face, softly illuminated by the moon, traced its way down his neck, only for his stomach to give a little jolt when he saw dark bruises flowering over George's skin.

"What happened?" he asked, taking a step forward and lifting his hand to inspect the bruises on George's neck, but when George jerked away, he stopped himself. "George, did someone hurt you?"

George's eyes looked sort of distant, and he shook his head. "Nothing happened."

"You're hurt," Dream said in concern.

"I just fell," George said shortly, bringing a hand up to self-consciously cover the bruises. Dream furrowed his brow and bit the inside of his cheek. His instincts were telling him to find whoever hurt George and make them pay for it, but George clearly didn't want to talk about it. And there was another hurt that Dream had to take care of first. One he was responsible for.

"I'm sorry, George," he said, feeling emotion work its way into his throat. "I'm sorry about everything. I was cruel to you. And you didn't do anything wrong. I don't know how to make it up to you, but... I'm just so, so sorry."

The words seemed to fall flat, and George's eyes remained guarded. "Thank you for apologizing," he eventually responded, shifting and crossing his arms across his chest.

Dream exhaled softly and dipped his head. "For a second, I thought you might leave for good."

George shook his head. He looked sad. "That wasn't really an option."

"Even after everything I said," Dream said, feeling ashamed.

George bit his lip. "I can't tell you how much I wish I could change your mind about Cecily," he said, his voice trembling, "but you're my best friend and the future king, Dream, and I'm loyal to you. Always."

The words resonated somewhere deep in Dream's chest, leaving him aching. He couldn't wait any longer. "You did change my mind, George."

His face shifted. "Did... did you talk to Daniel?"

"Yes. And he couldn't answer any of my questions," Dream said, feeling his frustration well up again. "This whole time, I thought he knew everything. That he knew something I didn't. And I don't think he's wrong about everything," he clarified, to himself more than anyone. "I still don't trust magic, I still don't think it's right. But he's wrong about Cecily. He's just bitter and angry and... and you were right, George. You were right."

George's face trembled, and his arms dropped to his sides, his hands shaking. "Dream, that's... I'm so happy to hear you say that," he said. "Did you talk to him about Cecily?"

“He wouldn’t listen,” Dream said, trying to choose his next words carefully, “but... she’s gone. She fled, with her children.”

George took a shuddering breath and Dream saw the tension physically leave his shoulders as he dropped his head into his hands. When he looked up, there was a vulnerability in his gaze that sent a shiver racing through Dream’s body, and he could hear the same relief and gratitude and – and something else, something he couldn’t name, that burned in his own chest – as George said, “you let her go. You -,”

George practically fell into Dream, wrapping his arms around him tightly and burying his face into Dream’s shoulder. Dream hugged him right back with a relieved exhale, one arm wrapping around George’s shoulders, the other coming up to touch his head, his fingers pushing through the soft hair at the base of George’s neck. He felt George trembling and pulled him a little closer, closing his eyes and pressing his nose into the top of George’s head. He could feel every place where they were touching, felt George shift a little closer to him, turning his face towards Dream’s neck.

It was a lot. It was more, more than the way friends embrace. Dream needed it, needed to know that George was physically there, that he *wanted* to be there with Dream. That they were okay.

Eventually, they broke apart, but only slightly, each still keeping a hand grounded on the other, George’s hand on Dream’s arm, Dream’s hand gently brushing the side of George’s neck. They stayed there for a long moment, inches apart, looking into each other’s eyes for something, some confirmation. Dream’s gaze flickered to George’s lips. He shifted a half inch closer.

And then George stepped back, his eyes flickering away, and Dream’s heart fell in a way he didn’t know it could, stuttered and crashed in an embarrassing return to reality. George cleared his throat and Dream felt ashamed, pulling away and rubbing the back of his neck.

“It’s really late,” Dream said. “We should get back before somebody sees us.”

George nodded, and the two of them clambered down the rocks together, making their way back towards the dark castle in a strange, tense silence.

Dream felt embarrassed. Kept his gaze on his feet as he walked. He had misread the whole situation. He had put his friendship with George at risk – *again*. And... and there wasn’t much that was more important than that.

He had to be more careful.

He wished he knew what George was thinking.

---

George wanted to kiss Dream. He wanted to kiss him terribly. He wanted to touch his face and press their lips together and show him, show him how much he cared, and how much he forgave him, and how – how happy he was that Dream had listened, that he had *changed*, like George knew he would. He wanted Dream to kiss him back, wanted Dream’s hands on him, on his face, his neck – he shivered at the thought. He wanted *everything*.

And he wanted to show Dream his magic, too, *then*, right then, wanted to astonish him,



wanted his acceptance, wanted to show him everything he had done for him, and would continue to do for him, wanted to wrap his magic around them in a protective blanket so that nobody, not the Circle, not anybody, could ever reach them. So that nobody could hurt them. He wanted to let Dream in and tell him everything, *everything*, he wanted it so badly it physically hurt.

George wanted all of it, so much, all at once, that it scared him, sent a bolt of terror right down to his core, and he slammed the gates down on the outpouring of emotion and forced himself to take one, two steps back, used superhuman effort to take his hands off of Dream, to remove the grounding physical touch that he wanted so much.

He couldn't. He just couldn't. Not yet.

*He wasn't certain.*

And – and he couldn't do one without the other. Couldn't kiss Dream while still lying to him. Couldn't give Dream that part of himself without giving him everything. It needed to be all or nothing, and right now... right now, it couldn't be all.

George wasn't blind. He didn't miss the way Dream's face fell and shuttered closed, the way he rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment, trying to push past the moment like nothing had happened. He mumbled something about it being late and George just nodded, barely able to process what was happening anymore, putting one foot in front of the other as they made their way back towards the looming castle.

George's feelings weren't important. They weren't. He was just being selfish. Wanting too much, too fast. Putting his own stupid desires in front of what was best. Dream couldn't be with him. He was a prince, and George was nobody. It was too risky, too dangerous, for them to be together like that.

And George had practice, anyway, with keeping things like this hidden from Dream. He packaged all of his feelings up and placed them right alongside his magic in that part of himself he hid from Dream, hid from everybody else. It was easy, actually. It was a familiar sort of ache. A safe one.

When they reached the door to George's room, Dream laid a tentative hand on George's shoulder.

"Tomorrow will be rough," he said quietly. "Lay low. We never talked about any of this, okay?"

George nodded, biting his lip. Dream's eyes flickered around George's face and then down, and he gave George a quick, tight-lipped smile before walking away. George watched him disappear around the next corner before he let himself into his room, collapsing in his bed.

He was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. He stared at the ceiling as the events of the night played over and over on a loop in his mind.

The Circle was coming.

George had so much work to do.

## Chapter End Notes

\*exits writing coma\* h.... hi

sorry for the long end note but I had a few things to say :)

1. in this house we believe in minx supremacy. she is so fucking cool

I had to retcon chapter 4 to make Minx the main sorceress instead of my random OC because... fuck it she's so awesome and I have to include her, and her dynamic works so well with what this character needs to be! so if you've been following closely at all, Lilian no longer exists, Minx ate her. lmfao.

2. we're about halfway through the story!! there are five chapters remaining: nineteen pts. 1 & 2; and then the big finale, twenty, parts 1, 2, and 3. :)

thank you SO MUCH for reading <3

(oh oh one last thing another new familiar face is coming next chapter and let me just say.... i am so excited) (blood for the blood god)

## nineteen, pt. 1

### Chapter Notes

Hello again!! Before we begin: the amazing @MellionderEra on Twitter illustrated a scene from the previous chapter, and it's SO GOOD! Go [give them some love!!!!](#) [linked with permission!]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

### *nineteen*

Nobody knew anything about the assassin himself. They didn't know where he was from, or what his strange name meant. They didn't know why he rarely spoke, or where he went when he disappeared for months at a time.

But they knew his work. Throats slit in the dead of night. Knights cut down where they stood. Entire groups of bandits or soldiers found slaughtered, not a single enemy casualty among them. There was only one assassin in Albion who worked with that kind of deadly efficiency.

He had magic, but that wasn't the scariest thing about him. The scariest thing about him was how he wielded a blade as though it were weightless, as though it were another limb. That was what most people called him, actually. The Blade.

If you were brave enough to ask the man himself, he might have told you he found the moniker a little silly. But it gave him an air of mystery that only increased demand for his services. So Technoblade didn't correct people, and he rarely gave them his full name. He just sharpened his weapons, tended to his small farm, and waited for the next job.

He had helped the Circle at various times over the last few years. He supposed it should have mattered that the Circle was allegedly on his side, making it less risky to be a magic user, but he didn't really care. Mainly, he kept helping the Circle because they had the most interesting assignments: noblemen whose deaths needed finessing, or knights who could put up an actual fight. They were always much more challenging than the usual, boring requests he got, kills without honor or difficulty.

Techno didn't care about who was in charge, as long as the person in charge left him alone. He only cared about being the best at what he did.

And the job Minx had been dropping hints about for months, the job that was allegedly bigger than anything he'd done yet... that had *real* potential.

So on the day Minx arrived at the doorstep of the Blade's little farmhouse, walking in just as he was pulling off his mud-caked boots from a day in the fields, he could see by the peculiar

glint in her eye that the moment had arrived.

“They both need to die at the same time,” Minx said, lounging on the chair across from Techno. “Can’t be room for either of them to mount a defense.”

“Tricky, but not impossible,” Techno mused. He absent-mindedly tied back his long, straw-colored hair into a ponytail as the gears in his head started to work over the details Minx had provided.

“Do you have someone you can ask for help?”

“Don't need it.”

“Love the confidence, but you *are* infiltrating a heavily fortified castle to kill *two* simultaneous targets,” Minx reminded him. “Backup wouldn’t be the worst idea.”

Techno huffed, but dipped his head in acknowledgement. “Fair enough. I’ll ask around.” That was... an exaggeration. Techno wasn't especially social. He would ask Phil, and Phil would say yes.

“Good,” Minx said, flashing a grin. “They won’t have a clue what’s coming.”

Techno hummed. “I sorta hope they do, actually,” he said, pulling his favorite knife from its leather sheath and flipping it over in his hands. “That would make things much more interestin’.”

As a slow grin spread across his face, Minx caught a glimpse of the sharpened canine teeth that had led many people to speculate that the Blade wasn’t fully human. Even though she knew better, it was still enough to send a shiver down her spine. Not for the first time, she counted herself lucky that Technoblade was working for *her*.

That night, Techno went to see Phil, and in the morning, they set their sights on Camelot.

---

The village of Blackwell was smoldering to ash. Every building had burned down, the village’s crops reduced to scorched earth. A group of villagers huddled together on a nearby hill, some of them weeping softly as they watched their home burn to the ground. Several of them had not escaped.

“We got here too late,” Clay muttered. “*Again.*” He watched the grim sight from his saddle, clenching his horse’s reins in tightly closed fists. It was the second village to burn to the ground that month. The *sixth* this year. Like each of the other attacks, Clay had raced here as soon as he had heard the news. Like each of the others, he was too late to do anything but watch the village crumble.

“Who the hell is doing this?” Sappnap muttered. The shorter, stockier knight had come with him. His face was disturbed.

“Pillagers, I guess,” Clay said, unconvinced. Pillagers had been the official answer for months, but it didn’t sit right with him. These attacks were more extreme, more frequent, and more focused on total destruction than any pillager attacks he had ever seen. Clay had his own

suspicions, but they hadn't been popular with those he had shared them with. Especially his father.

“They weren’t pillagers,” came a voice, and the two men turned to see an older woman approaching them. She was dressed in common garb, her face lined with age, and she looked desperate. “At least, they didn’t look like it.”

“What did they look like?” Clay asked, turning his horse to better face her.

“They were so many of them, and they barely spoke,” she said, her voice hoarse from smoke. “They had these... these weapons. Spread fire, lightning fast.”

“Magic?” Sapnap asked urgently.

“Don’t know what else it could’ve been,” she said.

Clay sighed deeply, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“All our crops were destroyed,” the woman was murmuring, her gaze tracking over the burning village. “Our livestock killed. I don’t know what we’ll do ...”

“Don’t worry about that,” Clay said immediately. “We’re going to ride back to Camelot now and send people back with horses and carts. We’ll bring you all into the city and give you a place to stay, food to eat. We’ll take care of you.”

The relief on the woman’s face was palpable, and she bowed shallowly, her hand clutching at her heart. “Thank you, Prince Clay,” she said.

As Clay and Sapnap raced back to Camelot, Sapnap shouted over the sound of galloping hooves: “Daniel’s not gonna like this.”

Clay clenched his jaw and urged his horse on a little faster.

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The candlelight cast flickering shadows over the pages as George scanned another page of the book, one hand in his hair. The library was slightly cold and damp, retaining some of the winter chill that the spring was only beginning to thaw.

It had been several months since Cecily had escaped Camelot, and George had spent a significant portion of that time in the library, hunched over old manuscripts and scrolls in desperate search for ideas. His grandmother’s tomes had only taken him so far, and he had needed to migrate to the castle’s collections as he continued his search for something – *anything* – he could use against the impending threat of the Circle.

It was a danger that was growing more and more real by the day. King Daniel was chalking up the attacks on villages as raids from bandits or pillagers, but George knew better. They were coordinated – starting far from the castle and encroaching ever closer. The Circle was amassing a growing army of sorcerers, and probably using Mercian troops, too, and George was the only one who knew it - though, with no small amount of pride, he had watched Dream start to catch on to the clues the Circle had been leaving with each new attack.

Still, Daniel hadn't seen the truth. So George was searching desperately for something that

could help their situation: a spell, or a weapon, or the source of the golden light he had been unable to summon again.

But after months of research, George was starting to feel slightly helpless. He had found nothing useful, nothing remotely. Even this book, which had seemed promising, written in the Old Language and full of accounts of mystic weapons, was starting to blur together, as George scanned through another list of arrow enchantments that he couldn't use without being discovered.

That is, until he turned the page to see a section titled in large, capital letters:

### **“ABIRON RIHTCYNN SOJJEYNING”**

#### *The One True King.*

This pulled George's attention razor-sharp, and his eyes quickly scanned the page, soaking in everything in the language that had quickly become second-nature to him. The words filled him with excitement, and he cast a cursive glance around to make sure he was alone before carefully ripping out the relevant pages from the book, apologizing silently to the kind librarian who had helped him. He stuffed the pages into the inner pocket of his jacket and pushed away from the table.

“George?” came a voice from behind him, and he turned around, startled. Behind him stood a younger servant who George had asked for help. “Prince Clay is back.”

*Perfect timing.* “Thanks,” George said and ruffled the boy's hair as he left the library. This was something Dream needed to see.

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Clay and Sapnap entered the Great Hall expecting to see King Daniel gathered around the table with the Knights, discussing the problem at hand. But they didn't expect half of the knights to be nursing serious wounds, or to see a tall, familiar man standing at the table as well.

“Bad,” Clay said in surprise, and Sapnap rushed forward to embrace their friend, who grinned when he saw them, despite the fact that he was obviously injured. He had a fresh red cut running down the side of his face, and he was favoring his right leg.

“It's good to see you two,” Bad said with genuine affection. He looked different – more grown up. Ever since his father had died, Bad had been tasked with the responsibility of governing his inherited territory, Frisia, and the three had rarely seen each other. He held himself with the posture of a young man who had been given serious responsibility, and was shouldering it well.

“What happened here?” Clay asked as he joined the Knights.

“Lord Bad sent a messenger this morning informing us of an impending attack on Frisia,” King Daniel responded from the head of the table, barely looking at Clay. “I sent a group of knights to assist him.”

“Why wasn’t I aware of this?” Clay asked in frustration, setting his helmet down on the table with a thump.

“You weren’t needed,” Daniel said shortly. “Sir Eret was a capable leader.”

*Eret?* Clay bit his tongue as he glanced at Eret sharply, but the knight avoided his gaze. It's not that Eret wasn't a good knight. But Clay had been the one agonizing over the increased attacks on villages, clearly desperate to take direct action. And Clay was supposed to be the prince, if that meant anything at all.

“What happened in the fight?” Clay asked, turning towards Bad.

His friend’s face fell. “We couldn’t defend ourselves,” he said, shaking his head. “The knights fought well, but the people who attacked us – there’s no way they’re pillagers.”

Clay shot a look at his father, who didn’t meet his gaze. This was what Clay had been saying for months. His father had refused to listen.

“That’s what the people in Blackwell were saying, too,” Sapnap jumped in. “They said these men are far more organized. And... and that they’re using magic,” he finished somewhat hesitantly.

But clearly, he wasn’t saying anything new to the injured men around him.

“We could tell,” Bad said grimly. “They had axes that set fire to anything they touched. Swords that cleaved straight through our own, straight through the iron. We were trying to get creative with how we were fighting back, but it was too much. They set fire to the castle, and we were forced to flee.”

“Sir Punz was caught in the flames,” Eret added. “He died valiantly, defending his kingdom.”

Clay felt the loss like a punch to his stomach and set his hands on the table, dropping his head. There was a second of solemn silence around the circle.

A noise from behind Clay broke the silence. He turned his head to see the door sliding open. George slipped through the opening in the door, and then fell back against the wall.

While he was normally happy to see George, this time, Clay flinched, and turned to see Daniel’s gaze narrowing at the servant’s conspicuous entrance.

“All of this is way above the paygrade of average bandits,” Clay said, drawing his father’s attention towards him. “This has to be something else. Something more organized.”

“What are you suggesting, Prince Clay?” Daniel said.

“I... I don’t know, exactly. An organized group of sorcerers?”

“A group of random sorcerers who have enough men to successfully attack two villages in one day?” Daniel asked, spreading his hands out.

Clay bit his lip. “Maybe... maybe it’s Mercia.”

A hushed silence fell over the room.

“Do you have evidence for that accusation?” Daniel asked quietly.

Clay glanced around the room, but he saw only hesitancy on the faces of his friends. He took a deep breath. “We’ve all heard the rumors – that sorcery is taking hold in Mercia. If that’s true, maybe they’re launching an attack. Testing the waters for a full affront.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes at Clay. “You would have us declare war on our neighboring kingdom on the basis of rumors?”

Embarrassment flooded through Clay, but he stuck to his argument. “No. I’m just saying, maybe we should be more proactive. Figure out if the attacks are coming from a particular place. We can’t just keep sitting around, waiting for them to attack another village. And if they’re using magic weapons, then we need to find something that we can use to fight back.”

“Like *what*?” Daniel said, and the table fell quiet.

Suddenly, George cleared his throat, and suddenly the eyes of a dozen knights and the King were trained on him.

“Do you have something to say?” King Daniel said harshly. “Or are you merely eavesdropping as a means of avoiding your duties?”

Clay winced, and George blanched for a moment, but then the servant seemed to brace himself and he took a step forward. “I... I may have something that can help.”

Before Daniel could say anything else, George rushed up to the group of knights and shoved a pile of papers onto the table. They were written in a strange language, paragraphs upon paragraphs of foreign, illegible words. At the end of one of the pages, Clay caught sight of an intricate illustration: a sword, lodged into a large stone, its handle pointed in the air.

“It’s called Excalibur,” George said as the knights peered to take a look at the pages. “A legendary sword capable of withstanding any enchantment. It’s said it was forged by the fire of the last dragon. It’s stronger than any weapon Albion has ever known.”

“It can beat back magic?” Eret asked with interest. He leaned over to take a closer look.

“It’d put you on equal ground with whoever’s using magic to attack these villages,” George said with excitement.

Clay stared at him with wonder, wondering when George had worked up the courage to speak up like this in front of Daniel, who had made his distaste for the servant abundantly clear in the previous months. But the moment ran cold as Daniel stood and grabbed for the pages.

“This is written in the sorcerer’s language,” he hissed, his expression stormy as he flipped through them. He looked up at George. “You can read these?”

George went slightly pale. “I’ve... I’ve been learning the Old Language. As a method of research. That’s all.”

“This could be incredibly useful, Your Highness,” Bad jumped in. “We were completely defenseless against their magic in Frisia.”

“We should try to find this sword, then,” Clay said, looking at George. “What’s it called? Excalibur? Maybe I can -,”

“*ENOUGH*,” Daniel exploded, slamming the pages down on the table, and Clay tensed up, gritting his teeth. “This is *ridiculous*. *You -*,” and here he pointed at George, who took a small step



back, “are out of line for speaking in my court. And if it weren’t for my son, I’d have you thrown in prison for even *knowing* this language.”

“That’s not fair,” Clay said, moving slightly in front of George. “He’s just trying to help. Why can’t you -,”

“Shut *up*, Clay,” Daniel shouted, and the words hit sharply, Clay’s face warming in humiliation. “I will *not* allow you to go off on some wild goose chase to find some weapon that only exists in *myth*. You should be embarrassed for even entertaining the idea. We do not live in folklore. And if none of you have any helpful ideas for protecting our kingdom, then I will take my leave so I can have some space to *think*, an apparently rare skill.”

His outburst left the room in a tense, hostile silence, and once it became clear that nobody had anything to say in response, Daniel pushed away from the table and stalked towards his quarters.

Clay stood unmoving at the table as the other knights started to filter away, casting uncomfortable glances his way as they left. His hands were clenched into fists at his side, his gaze fixed on George’s papers, which had been crumpled in Daniel’s hands.

This? This was what talking to Daniel had been like ever since Cecily had escaped. Daniel hadn’t found out about Clay’s involvement. He hadn’t even admitted to suspecting his son. But he had treated Clay with distrust and outright disrespect ever since. It was downright humiliating, being treated like this in front of the entire court. Clay was being treated like a child, and it left him filled with a deep, simmering rage every time he spoke to his father.

“Well, *that* was fun,” Sarnap muttered, and Clay snapped out of his thoughts to see that he, George, and Bad were still lingering around the table, looking sympathetically at Clay. The prince sighed deeply, unclenching his fists and rubbing his face.

“Seriously, Clay, what’s going on with you two?” Bad asked quietly.

“You don’t even want to know.”

“I’m sorry,” George said. “I shouldn’t have spoken up.”

“You,” Dream said, leveling his gaze at George, “did not do anything wrong.” He grabbed the papers again, smoothing out the wrinkles Daniel had left. “This is the first actual *idea* we’ve had in months.”

“You think this thing actually exists, George?” Sarnap asked, leaning over to take a look at the illustration of Excalibur.

“Well,” George said, “I mean, I don’t know for *sure*. But, look.”

He grabbed a paper from the table and turned it over, and the four of them crowded around him to see a detailed map. Though the boundaries and borders were slightly strange, after staring at it for a few seconds, Dream started to recognize a familiar shape.

“This is the Darkling Woods,” he said in amazement, rotating the page a little until it matched up with his mental image of the thick woods that stood just outside of Camelot’s borders. “This... this says the sword is right past the Fallen Valley.”

“Exactly,” George said. “I mean, if there’s anywhere a mystical weapon would be hiding...”

*It would be in the Darkling Woods*, Dream finished mentally. A thick, nearly impenetrable thicket of trees, the Woods stretched for miles, touching the territories of Camelot, Merica and Nemeth at different points. If the Woods had been controllable, there might have been skirmishes over which kingdom had claim to it. But they weren't controllable, not even a little. In fact, they were notoriously deadly, full of hidden cliffs and ravines, and allegedly full of dangerous wild animals. Many men had died in those woods, and other than the few pathways that allowed safe passage through parts of the forest, they had been largely written off as uninhabitable.

The gears turned in Dream's head as his eyes scanned the map again, noting the little accuracies, the known rivers and valleys that ran through the Woods. The map seemed credible, if ancient.

"Well, even assuming it does exist," Dream heard Bad say, "anyone could have found it by now, right?"

"Even if they had," George said with certainty, "they wouldn't be able to take it."

"And why is that?"

George hesitated for a moment, and Dream looked up at him to see his face flicker with something he couldn't quite identify. He looked around the faces of his three friends and then pointed to a spot on the page. "It says you need to be a king to get the sword," he said, glancing briefly towards Dream. "I don't think many kings go on day trips through the Darkling Woods."

"I'm not a king yet, George," Dream said slowly.

"The exact interpretation is hard to explain, but you're royal blood. It will count. Trust me, Dream, I'm sure of it."

Dream wasn't quite convinced, but the longer he stared at the page, the longer the illustration of the sword in the stone seemed to stick in his brain. If it was true... if it was true, this could be important. *Really* important.

Dream had no idea how to *fight* against magic. He had never done it before, and, apparently, neither had his father – never in any real, organized way. And what if Dream's suspicions were true? What if Mercia had an army of sorcerers? He had no idea what to do with that. He had no idea how to protect Camelot.

And he was sick down to his bones of sitting around the castle doing nothing. Being sidelined by his father. Waiting for a fight to come to him that never arrived.

He needed to do something. He needed to be useful.

"I think I should go find it," he said, and felt his friends snap their heads towards him.

"Even after what your father said?" George asked, but he didn't sound unsure. He sounded hopeful. His gaze was fixed intently on Dream.

"*Especially* after what he said," Dream responded hotly. "My father doesn't have a plan, and neither do I. And our people are suffering for it. I'm not like him. I can't just stand by and watch this happen. If I leave tonight, I can be back in a number of days. And even if I can't find it... it's at least worth a try."

George nodded, his eyes bright.

Dream turned back to the map on the table and shivered as he remembered the tales he had heard of the Woods, the stories of brave men who never returned.

"It's going to be very dangerous," he said, and he couldn't deny the sliver of fear in his chest. "I... I can't ask any of you to risk your lives, to risk your position with my father, to -,"

"Dude," Sapnap interrupted, "shut up before you insult me. Obviously, I'm coming with you."

Dream whipped his head towards Sapnap and a relieved grin broke across his face. He clapped Sapnap on the shoulder, his friend reaching up to clasp his arm back with a broad smile. "Thank you," he said genuinely.

Then Bad cleared his throat, and when Dream looked at him, he looked torn. "I think you're right to go, Clay," Bad said, "and I support your decision. But... my people are here. They've lost their home. I have a responsibility to take care of them."

"I completely understand, Bad," Dream said. "You're doing right by your people. I really respect that." Bad smiled and nodded at him.

And then Dream turned to George, who was staring down at the papers on the table with a slightly crinkled brow. There was a moment's pause before he prompted, "George?"

George looked up, blinking owlishly. "What?"

"Are... do you want to come with me?" Dream asked, feeling suddenly quite nervous.

"Oh," George said, and a grin broke across his face. "I sort of thought that was a given."

The sentence pulled a laugh from Dream's mouth, even as it caused a confusing swirl of emotions in his chest, and he moved to embrace George like he did with Sapnap. But as he did he saw his friend shift away, his gaze glancing briefly towards their other friends, and he stopped himself mid-air, pulling back awkwardly.

Careful. They were so careful around each other now.

"Thank you, George," he said instead, trying to put his meaning into his voice, and George met his gaze and nodded.

"When should we leave?" Sapnap asked, and Dream returned his attention to the plan.

"Tonight," he said definitively. "The sooner we leave, the better. And I don't want to give my father the chance to ruin this. We'll leave as soon as it gets dark. It'll take us a few hours to get to the edge of the Woods. We'll sleep there, and then head into the woods as soon as it gets light."

"I'll put together what we need for food and shelter," George said, and Sapnap jumped in: "and I'll make a stop by the armory – they like me there, they won't ask questions."

"If you guys take longer than a week to return," Bad said, "I'll come and find you. Otherwise, I won't tell anyone where you've gone."

Dream nodded, looking around the table, and for a moment, it was like they were thirteen again, standing around and making plans to evade their lessons for an afternoon. He felt a warm rush of affection as he realized, not for the first time, that he had made friends with the greatest people in Camelot.

“This will work,” he said. “We’ll make it work.”

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Camelot was expecting two new servants to arrive that evening, kitchen workers who had been hired from Nemeth. But when the head cook met them at the castle that evening, he hesitated. They looked slightly different from the description he had been given. “Elric” stood somewhat shorter and had far lighter hair than he had been told to expect, and “Thomas” had long hair and eyeglasses that the cook hadn’t been informed of, both potential hazards in the kitchen. But they had given their names and anticipated stations accurately, so the cook eventually shrugged and led them to the shared room they’d be inhabiting during their employment.

He had no way of knowing that the two men he was actually expecting were lying face-down in a ditch twenty miles from Camelot, their throats cut before they could make a sound.

Once the door shut behind him, Technoblade and Phil dropped their bags on their respective beds, unpacking their tools. Techno set out each of his blades on his bed, organizing them by size, taking each out and inspecting it for a few moments before wrapping it back up in its protective cloth. The largest was his favorite rapier, which he wiped clean of the blood of the servants whose place they had taken. He wrapped it back up and knelt down to place the sword under his bed.

Phil hadn’t brought so many blunt weapons; his tools of choice were the ingredients needed to create certain potions, as well as a bow that glowed faintly in the small room.

“Have you seen what I did to this?” Phil asked with a small, proud smile, turning to show Techno the bow. “Cuts straight through armor, if you hit it right.”

Techno picked up the bow and turned it over in his hands, nodding appreciatively. “And you’re plannin’ to march that into the Great Hall, right?” he said dryly.

“Obviously not,” Phil scoffed, grabbing his weapon back from his friend. “We’re still following the plan, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Technoblade said, returning to his bed. It wasn’t very complicated, at the end of the day. After learning when and where the prince’s food was made, Phil would slip poison into his dinner tomorrow. Meanwhile, Techno would hunt down the King.

Simple, but effective. Phil had done this with Techno a dozen times before. As brutal as Techno was with the blade, Phil was a better infiltrator and was much more skilled with potion-making. Though poison wasn’t Techno’s preferred method of assassination, sometimes it was just the best option. And Phil was the only person on earth Techno actually trusted to do it right.

The two of them reported for duty a few minutes later, following the head cook around the kitchen. Techno half-listened to the cook, absorbing the relevant information and discarding unimportant details. As the cook rambled on about the details of bread-making, Techno’s eyes scanned across the kitchen, noting possible entrances and exits, looking for anything potentially dangerous.

His gaze caught on the sight of a short, dark-haired male servant talking in a whisper to a member of the kitchen staff, who nodded and went into the storage room. Techno narrowed his eyes. There was something different about the boy, whose clothes were slightly finer, more

colorful than the plain aprons given to the kitchen workers. He looked on guard, and something about him felt... strange, something Techno couldn't quite place.

The boy looked at him and their gazes met. Techno held it for a split second before looking away. After a few minutes, he glanced his direction again, but the boy was gone.

Later, Techno went up to the girl who had spoken to him.

"That was George," she said. She was young, and clearly trying to be helpful, trying to make a good impression on the newcomer. "He's the prince's personal servant."

Ah. "Interesting," Techno said, and dropped the topic.

Minx had told him about George. In fact, he was the reason they had elected to use poison on Prince Clay rather than brute force. Better to go for something more subtle than to let the prince's pet sorcerer have a chance at defending him.

Techno stared towards the door where George had disappeared with some amount of disappointment settling in his chest. Poison was the best way to get the job done, but Techno couldn't deny that he would have appreciated the challenge. A renowned warrior *and* a powerful sorcerer? Technoblade would cement his place in history for winning that fight.

And he *would* win that fight.

Who knew. There was still time for things to go wrong.

After he and Phil were allowed to return to their chambers late that night, Phil got into bed and fell asleep almost immediately, but Techno didn't. He sat awake for most of the night, methodically cleaning each of his knives. Thinking. Preparing. Waiting for the light of the morning.

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The first leg of their journey was passed in tense silence, except for the rhythmic drumming of their horse's hooves and the occasional whisper of warning, as Dream, George, and Sapnap did their best to avoid being seen while still within Camelot's borders. Their horses were laden with supplies, and Dream and Sapnap had both put on their chainmail, just in case. Night had fallen quickly, and they couldn't take their horses at more than a trot, though the road they were taking to reach the border was safe and well-worn. They rode through the forest surrounding Camelot, through fields of wheat waving softly in the breeze, and past several darkened villages.

After a few hours, George could see something that looked like a black wall on the horizon, darker, even, than the night sky, because it held no stars. It grew steadily larger as they forged on, and soon George could make out the tops of trees, standing a hundred feet or taller.

The Darkling Woods.

He shivered, partially from the chill of the night air, but mostly in anticipation. He had never been in the Woods, himself. Only grown up on myths, like every child in Camelot. How much of it was true and how much was fiction was impossible to know.

But the Woods didn't need myth to be terrifying.

Dream pulled his horse to a stop a mile or so away from the Woods, once they had grown close enough to see the edge of the treeline. They were in the middle of a large, empty field, surrounded by softly rolling hills. George and Sapnap stopped next to him.

“We’ll camp here for the night,” Dream said, and the other two nodded.

They set up camp quietly, setting out sleeping rolls and starting a small campfire for warmth. George took first watch, agreeing to wake Sapnap up in a couple of hours, and sat quietly by the fire as his friends drifted to sleep. The adrenaline of the day and the busyness of the past few hours started to settle in the quiet evening. There was no sound except for the low whistle of wind over the hills and the soft crackling of the campfire. George tugged his jacket a little tighter around his shoulders and sighed, relaxing for the first time that day. He was glad to take first shift. Glad to feel in control, as he watched over the sleeping figures of his friends. If he needed to use magic to protect them, he could.

A sweet sort of melancholy overtook him as he stared up at the stars, which seemed to shine even brighter than usual in the countryside. He hugged his legs to his chest and took a deep breath.

Eventually, his gaze drifted to Dream’s figure. The prince was lying on his side, his back to the fire, his shoulders rising and falling softly with even breath. His hair, which was growing longer, was tucked behind his ears.

George felt a familiar ache in his chest and leaned his head against his knees, letting himself stare a little longer at his friend.

He had been so careful. Keeping Dream at an arm’s distance, despite the fact that every bone in his body wanted to get closer, at almost every moment.

It was for the best, for so many reasons. Daniel, for one, clearly hated George, and George didn’t feel the need to give him more ammunition against Dream. And besides, George was still lying to Dream, every single day.

He had even lied about Excalibur. You didn’t need to have royal blood to take the sword, or whatever bullshit George had come up with on the spot. You needed to be *Dream*. You needed to be the True King of Albion.

No. Until George could be honest with Dream about everything, he couldn’t let himself get any closer. Yet when George let his mind wander in quiet moments like this, he found himself imagining what it would be like to lay down next to Dream. To feel Dream’s arms around him, pulling him close; to press his face into the crook of Dream’s neck, to tangle his hands in his hair, no fear or hesitancy in the touch, just comfort and security.

He shivered and hugged himself a little tighter. He looked up at the stars again, reminding himself what was most important right now. It was protecting Dream – keeping him alive. It was protecting Camelot.

It was fulfilling Dream’s destiny. A destiny that didn’t involve George. At least, not in the ways George wanted it to.

George sat there, lost in his thoughts, for what felt like only a few moments, and was shocked when he suddenly saw faint pink light start to glow over the eastern horizon. He blinked himself alert and realized he had accidentally stayed up all night. He looked down at his feet and saw their campfire had burned down to white ash.

George sighed and pulled himself to his feet, stretching the ache out of his limbs. He actually didn't mind having stayed up all night. It was a semi-regular occurrence for him, at this point. And Dream and Sapnap needed their rest more than he did.

Though the field looked brighter in the light of early morning, the Darkling Woods were still as dark as night, the impossibly tall pine trees stretching like the parapets of the Camelot castle over George's head. George couldn't see more than a few feet into the forest, and he steeled himself for the upcoming day.

The three of them were in for an interesting ride.

---

Clay was dreaming of his mother.

It was all so painfully familiar. Every word, every image. Nothing ever changed.

And at the end, he heard those sounds again – the music notes that sounded like words, words he had never been able to make out. Every time he had this dream, he felt like he got a little closer, a little nearer to whatever final message it was that his mother was trying to send him.

This time, he could nearly make it out. Nearly hear it. It sounded like –

*You can –*

And then he was being shaken awake, and he sat up with a little jolt, staring at George, who was crouched in front of him.

“George,” he muttered, blinking blearily. “Is it my turn?”

George kind of squinted. “Um...”

Dream looked around and saw that it was already morning, their campsite lit up pink and orange by the sunrise. Sapnap was sitting by the burned-down remains of their fire, yawning.

“Did you stay up all night?” he asked George in confusion.

George made a face. “It was sort of an accident. Anyway, it looked like you two needed your beauty sleep,” he said dryly.

Dream huffed and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, pulling himself to his feet as George sat down next to Sapnap. Aside from the slightly darker circles under his eyes, George looked more or less okay. Dream couldn't help a flicker of worry for his friend, though. He wondered how many times George had stayed awake through the night before.

“I don't think that sleep made me any more beautiful, unfortunately for you two,” Dream said, taking a seat next to Sapnap and grabbing for the bag with their food rations. “I feel like shit.”

“Aww, does our little Princess miss his comfy bed?” Sapnap snickered, taking an enormous bite of bread and cheese. “You're almost as bad as George, complaining about how his little booty is sore from the horse ride.”

“Careful, Sapnap,” George warned, “or I'll have to start repeating some of the things you

were saying in your sleep."

"I was *not* talking in my sleep," Sapnap said defensively as Dream barked out a laugh. "You are fully bullshitting."

"Wanna bet?" George said, raising his eyebrows.

"I would bet you one hundred thousand gold pieces I wasn't sleep-talking," Sapnap said confidently.

"Hmm, then it must have been a little bird I heard last night talking to... Kacey, was it?" George said casually, and Sapnap's face suddenly flushed beet red, and Dream laughed so hard he started wheezing as George kept going in a high-pitched impression: "*oh, Kacey, you're so pretty, Kacey, I love you so much...*"

"Shut up George I did not say that!!" Sapnap protested, jumping to his feet, and Dream and George both cackled with laughter. "Oh, my god. I hate you guys so much. I'm going back to Camelot."

"No, you're not," Dream said, still chuckling and wiping at his eyes.

"Try me."

It felt good to laugh, and the three kept chatting mindlessly as they finished their breakfast, packed up camp and returned to their horses, heading towards the Darkling Woods as the sun rose higher in the sky.

But they fell quiet as they reached the edge of the forest, looking in.

The path they had taken to reach the Woods had ended. From now on, they'd be going through uncharted territory. The Woods were eerily silent, and the trees were so thick that they cut off almost all sunlight. The three of them paused for a moment, staring straight ahead.

"You guys ready?" Dream asked, turning to look at his friends.

Sapnap nodded, pulling himself up bravely. "You know it."

George was staring quietly into the Woods, a strange expression on his face.

"Ready, George?"

George looked straight at him and nodded. "Ready."

"Then let's go," Dream said, and led them into the unknown.

---

Camelot had descended into chaos.

"Are things normally like this?" Phil whispered to Techno as they made their way towards the kitchen, as per their plan. Around them, servants were clustered in little groups, whispering frantically to each other. Techno heard someone shouting down the hall.



“No. Something's definitely goin' on,” Techno said, trying unsuccessfully to listen in on a nearby conversation.

Suddenly, he caught sight of the kitchen girl he had spoken to yesterday, and he went up to her, tapping her on the shoulder. She whirled and gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“What's happenin'?” he asked her, motioning generally to the chaos.

The girl looked around them, as though making sure nobody could overhear. “You didn't hear this from me, but... the prince has disappeared.”

*Huh.* “Disappeared?”

“A stablehand saw his servant leading a few horses towards the gate last night,” she whispered. “Rumor has it, they're heading for the Darkling Woods. Nobody really knows why.”

Techno glanced at Phil, whose forehead was furrowed. “Thanks for the intel,” he said to the girl, who gave him a kind of confused smile, and then he pulled Phil back towards their room.

“Alright. Change of plans,” he said as soon as he closed the door.

Phil looked worried. “Ah... what do you think?” he said in a low whisper. “We take care of the king, and then go for the prince?”

Techno shook his head with an exhale. “Minx wants it to be simultaneous, remember? If we only kill Daniel, people'll start rallyin' behind Clay. We can't just cut one head off a two-headed snake and hope it stops squirmin'.”

“So we wait for the prince to return?” Phil murmured, but the gears were already turning in Techno's head.

There was a challenge here, but the challenge wasn't in Camelot. The challenge was riding away from him, and into the most dangerous place in Albion.

And it was enticing.

“I'll tell you what we do,” Techno said, a glint in his eye. “We switch.”

He headed straight for his bed, kneeling to retrieve his rapier from the floor, while Phil said, “what do you mean?”

“You stay here. You wait two days. That's how long it'll take me to catch up with them,” Techno said, throwing a few things in a small pack. “I'll kill Clay while he's far away from the defenses of the castle. And you'll poison the king. Boom. Simultaneous. And, honestly? Much more fun.”

Phil sucked in a breath. “You sure about this, Techno?”

“You doubtin' me, Phil?” Techno retorted, raising an eyebrow at his friend.

Phil gave him a look.

“I'll be fine,” Techno insisted. His voice was quiet and almost casual. “I'm gonna slit the little sorcerer's throat before he knows what's happenin', and then I'm gonna kill the prince and bring back his head on a platter.”

The words were stark, but they were nothing new for the two of them. This was what they did. They dealt in blood.

“Easy as that?” Phil said with a small sigh.

Technoblade grinned sharply.

“Easy as that.”

## Chapter End Notes

I know this chapter was a lot of set-up... but I hope you still enjoyed it. The next chapter is going to be crazy!!

By the way: if you are interested in reading more from me, I'm currently writing a spin-off Dream SMP fic that takes place after the most recent election; it's a non-ship fic that enjoys shorter, more frequent uploads. you can find it here: ["wait a minute"](#)

Since this fic requires a lot of prior planning and updates are much longer, I'll still plan on updating this fic weekly until it's complete!

Thank you so much for reading! <3 <3 <33

## nineteen, pt. 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The Darkling Woods felt strangely motionless, like time hadn't actually passed within the forest for a long time. Even the air felt close-knit and still, almost oppressive. At first, the trio tried to keep up their lighthearted banter. But that quickly started to feel wrong, almost offensive, as though they were desecrating something sacred by disrupting the unearthly silence.

They moved slowly. There wasn't a cleared path, and their horses had to pick carefully over the forest foliage, gnarled roots and mossy stones. Clay kept getting hit by low-hanging branches, which made the other two snicker. George kept his map out the entire time, guiding them past milestones.

The forest quickly lived up to its dangerous reputation. Almost an hour in, the dense trees suddenly gave way to a ravine that was completely hidden until Sapnap's horse was faltering on the edge, scrambling on loose earth. George had to jerk his hand up, forcing the ground to stay still for a few seconds longer until Clay could grab the reins of Sapnap's horse and yank them back to solid ground, just as the edge of the cliff gave way into a rockslide.

"Thanks, Clay," Sapnap said, his eyes wide, and they continued on.

A little while later, Clay pulled them to a stop, holding out a hand in warning, as something crashed through the forest in front of them. The trio froze in their place as they saw an enormous wild boar push through the trees, its snout waving in the air. The boar was huge, nearly five feet tall and two hundred pounds, with long, sharp tusks.

It looked their way, and then it let out an awful squeal as it started to race directly towards George, crashing through the forest.

George pulled his horse back, but his sleep-deprived brain short-circuited – he had no idea how to stop the rampaging beast, and for a second he thought the thing might gore Daisy with its tusks until two arrows flew through the air and embedded themselves in the boar's side, making it rear back, crying in pain. Clay knocked back another arrow and let it fly, and the boar fled, running into the forest and disappearing from sight.

George looked at Clay with astonishment.

"You alright?" the prince asked, securing his bow on his back.

"Yeah," George breathed.

"Good thing we have Clay here to protect us, huh, George?" Sapnap said with a faint chuckle. George just swallowed.

A few hours later, George brought the group to a stop.

“Do you hear that?” he asked.

Through the muffled air, they could hear something that sounded faintly like rushing water. They followed the sound until they came across a wide, shallow river with a steady current, bubbling and frothing over a rocky riverbed.

George moved closer to Clay to show him the map. “We go south from here, and then west at the river’s bend.”

“Why are we trusting George with the map again?” Sappnap sniped from behind them. “He has a hard time navigating to his own room most days.”

“That was *one time*,” Clay jumped to George’s defense. “And only because you kept giving him whiskey.”

“Okay, fair,” Sappnap snorted. “But if George gets us lost and we run out of food, I know who we’re eating first.”

"Gross, Sappnap."

The noise of the river broke the solemn tension a little bit, and as their horses plodded along the riverbank, the three of them fell into easy conversation to pass the time. George even found himself enjoying the ride, looking around at the thick forest around them as his horse plodded a little bit behind Clay and Sappnap’s. Yet he thought that Clay was still a little quiet, a little serious. The prince seemed lost in his thoughts multiple times, staring at the running water like he was looking for something hidden in the river.

Eventually, the daylight started to fade.

“Should we find a place to camp?” Sappnap asked, but George peered at his map.

“Let’s keep going just a little longer,” he said. “We should be getting close.”

“Close to what?” Clay said, but only a moment later, their ears picked up on something new. It was the sound of the river magnified a hundred times, a thundering sound that made Clay and Sappnap glance at George with interest.

The trio picked up the pace, trotting along the river bank. It sloped gently around a dense part of the forest –

And then they were staring at an enormous waterfall, the river thundering and frothing over the rocks at the bottom of a large cliff. Below them spread a huge lake, glittering in the sun that was just beginning to set over the western horizon. There was a small clearing around the lake, with soft grass circling the lake’s sandy beach.

George, Sappnap, and Clay stood at the top of the cliff, staring at the lake in wonder.

“Okay,” Clay said, nodding definitively. “*This* is where we camp.”

Their horses picked their way down the side of the cliff easily enough, and the trio dismounted once they reached the grassy clearing, starting to unpack their things for the night. George trailed off into the forest to collect kindling for the fire, but when he returned, he realized that the other two weren’t setting up camp at all – they were dunking each other in the water, half-clothed.

“What are you idiots doing?” he shouted at them just as Sapnap tackled Clay under water.

Dream came up to the surface, water pouring off of him, shaking his wet hair like a dog. “George, get in here!”

“Absolutely not,” George said, wrinkling his nose. “I’m not getting all wet right before dinner.”

“George,” Dream called playfully, and George noticed with alarm that he was starting to move towards him. “I *said*, get in here.”

“Don’t you dare,” George warned, taking a few steps back.

But Dream had made up his mind. He suddenly lunged onto the beach, sprinting up to George and scooping him over his shoulder like he weighed nothing. George shrieked in protest, hitting Dream’s back with his fists, but Dream just laughed, running towards the lake and tossing him in the water.

George came up gasping for air, water trickling into his eyes, and Sapnap laughed so hard he accidentally dunked his own head under the surface.

“That is so not fair,” he complained at Dream, who grinned wickedly, swimming towards him.

“Oh, come on,” Dream said playfully. “You love me.”

The words caught George slightly off-guard, and he reacted by shoving Dream’s head under, seeing air pockets bubble up as Dream laughed from underwater. Despite the cold of the lake, George felt warmth rise up in his chest, and he swam backwards a little bit, unable to deny that it felt good to swim, to stretch his limbs after the long, uncomfortable horse ride.

They got out of the lake to get dry just as the sun truly set, leaving them in the soft light of the evening. As the sunlight faded, they realized that the lake seemed to be glowing with a pale blue light that radiated from its center. George reached into the lake and pulled out a stone from the bottom; it had a strange sort of algae coating it that glimmered with bioluminescent light.

“Never seen anything like this before,” he said in wonder, handing it to Dream, who turned the glowing stone over in his hands, inspecting it closely. The three of them were sitting on the beach, looking out over the water.

“Yeah, I gotta admit,” Sapnap said from Dream’s left, “this place is really beautiful.”

George hummed in agreement, but couldn’t pass up the opportunity: “as beautiful as this Kacey person you were talking about, or...?”

“Shut up, dude,” Sapnap grumbled, as Dream choked on a surprised laugh.

“Who is she, anyways?” George asked curiously, leaning back on his hands.

“A noblewoman from Northumbria I met a few months ago,” Sapnap mumbled, his face going red. “I have a chance, I’m telling you. I’m *great* with women.”

“Sure you are,” George said, and Sapnap shot him a glance.

“You should have seen him in school, George,” Dream said with a little chuckle. “He was a

regular heartbreaker.”

“Oh, says you,” Sarnap said. “Dude, you could have had *any girl* in Camelot, I swear.”

“Whatever,” Dream said dismissively as George felt suddenly strange, looking down at his feet.

“I’m not kidding. I don’t know why you never tried with that one girl – what’s her name, Gwen? She was *so* into you.”

George watched Clay out of the corner of his eye, but the prince barely reacted.

“I don’t really get a choice, at the end of the day,” he eventually said, causing both George and Sarnap to look towards him in confusion. His shoulders kind of tensed at the attention, and he threw the glowing stone in his hand into the lake with a little splash. “Um. I mean. My dad was telling me that... I’ll probably have to marry strategically, y’know? Like, to somebody from another kingdom. Maybe somebody I’ve never even met.”

The words made George’s stomach twist, and Sarnap gave a low whistle. “Damn, man. That sucks.”

Clay kind of shrugged. “It’s not my favorite thing, but. I guess it’s what you get when you’re in a royal family. You wait until your kingdom really needs an ally, and then you get married. And you kind of... hope... that you like the person you get married to.”

“Still, man. That’s heavy.”

“It’s what’s best for Camelot,” Clay said, the words rolling off his tongue automatically, then hesitated. “Still. I dunno. Maybe one of these days I’ll just tell my old man to fuck off.” He laughed shortly, but the words came out perhaps a bit truer than he intended.

The three of them sat quietly for a little while longer before Sarnap hoisted himself to his feet, saying he was going to go look after his horse, which had gotten scraped in the ravine incident from earlier. He wandered away, and Dream and George were left sitting on the beach, illuminated by the strange blue glow of the lake.

A strange tension filled the air. They weren’t talking, yet neither of them made a move to leave. George snuck a glance at Dream but saw that his gaze was unfocused. He looked lost in his thoughts again.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked.

Dream furrowed his brow softly and shrugged. “Dunno.”

George couldn’t help but snort. “You’re just sitting there with an empty head?”

Dream shot him a look, but he smiled despite himself. He leaned forward, folding his arms over his knees.

Then he said, “what if this is all a waste?”

George tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

Dream looked conflicted. “You said the book said you have to be a king to take Excalibur from the stone. I mean, I know you said *royal blood* or whatever, but that sort of sounded like a

lie,” he said, and George winced. “Well, I’m not a king. I won’t be for a long time. So... what if I’m not able to do it?”

George took a deep breath. An owl hooted softly from the trees, and the waterfall rushed into the lake. “You’ll be able,” he said.

“You sound so sure,” Dream said, his voice soft.

“Because I am.”

“Why? Do you know something I don’t?” Dream asked wryly, but then George hesitated for a second too long, and Dream looked at him quickly. “...George?”

George’s heartbeat picked up in his chest, and he felt a strange rush in his head. There was something about the moment, the strange tension in the air, the surreal atmosphere of their surroundings, that was pulling him towards honesty. There was something in his head telling him: *now is the time*.

“I may have left out a few details about what the book says,” he said in a rush.

Dream looked alarmed. “What do you mean?”

George picked nervously at his knee. “It doesn’t say you have to be a king to take Excalibur,” he said. His voice rang strangely in his ears – as though he were listening to someone else speak. “It says you have to be *the* king. The One True King.”

“George. What the hell are you talking about?”

“It’s – I’m not sure exactly,” George hedged, trying to make it sound as though this were new to him, as well. “But I’ve seen other texts refer to it. It’s an old legend, a really old one, about a king from Camelot who... who’s destined to be even greater. A king who will unite Albion into a time of peace.”

There was a long, shocked pause, and then Dream’s face shifted into panic.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me this?” he said, his voice rising. “We need *that person* to get the sword? Then... then we’re screwed!”

George couldn’t help the laugh that escaped his throat. “Dream. I think that person is you.”

“*What?*” Dream said incredulously.

The words bubbled out of him as if he had been holding them in, like a breath underwater. “I think that’s your destiny. I actually do. I think you probably know it, too – that you have something bigger to do in this life. That you have a *purpose*.”

The words stopped Dream still, and he stared at George in open shock, his mouth hanging slightly open.

George felt light-headed, off-balance. Like he was in a dream instead of reality.

“George,” Dream said, shifting position so that he was facing him directly. “Why are you saying this?”

The question caught him by surprise and he stopped, fumbling for words. “It’s... what?”

“You’ve obviously been, like, *thinking* about this,” Dream pressed. His eyes scoured George’s face, and George’s heart stuttered. “Where did you get all of this? Seriously?”

“It’s... I don’t know,” George said. He felt inspected, and the thought panicked him and sent him straight into deflection mode. “It’s just something I... feel.”

Dream’s forehead furrowed. “You’re lying,” he said, and his voice sounded confused. He was stating a fact, not making an accusation. “I can tell.”

George felt the instinct to protest rise up, but he didn’t.

“Where are you getting this?” Dream asked again, quietly.

“Dream...”

George didn’t want to lie. But what was he supposed to say? *It’s written in prophecy, a prophecy that I’ve learned from other sorcerers?*

“I don’t think I should tell you,” he said instead.

This clearly shocked Dream. “*What?*” he snapped, venom entering his voice. “What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“I *can’t* tell you,” George rephrased, feeling guilty, still, and nervous especially, but finding this dodge more palatable than another lie, and far safer than the truth.

“George, I’m not joking,” Dream warned. “You better tell me where you’re getting these ideas before I order you to.”

This made George laugh slightly, which did nothing to break the tension. “You wish,” he said simply, starting to push himself to his feet.

But Dream caught his arm and pulled him back to the ground, tugging George closer so that he was kneeling right in front of him.

“George,” he pleaded, and his face was confused, almost betrayed. “You can’t just not tell me. We... we tell each other everything.”

The sentence was so true and so deeply untrue at the same time that it echoed loudly in George’s head, and he just stared at Dream, the enormity of the unspoken thing between them growing so heavy in his chest that he couldn’t breathe for a moment.

“Do we, Dream?” George finally said, so quietly yet so loudly into the air between them, where there wasn’t very much space at all.

Dream’s eyes widened slightly. His gaze dropped to George’s mouth, then down to where his hand held George’s wrist.

And then they heard Sapnap’s steps coming up behind them.

Dream dropped George’s hand and looked away as Sapnap said, “hey, guys, are we gonna -  
,”

He stopped as George rose to his feet, heading back towards their camp without a word. “Uh... did I miss something?”



“It’s nothing,” George said, his mind buzzing. “I’m going to get some more kindling.”

When he returned, Dream was still sitting on the beach, staring at the glowing water.

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The sound of his horse’s hooves thundering against the earth filled Technoblade’s ears as he sped across the countryside. His braided hair flew out behind him, and a dark, heavy cape was pinned around his neck. He had ground to make up, and not much time to do it.

The Darkling Woods rose up quickly in front of him, and he stopped near its border, looking around for some sign of the prince and his companion.

He found it about a half mile away – the white ash of a campfire burned into the heath. The unmistakable remnants of a camp. He crouched and found three distinct indentations in the soft grass of the hill. Clay must have brought someone else with him. it didn't matter. Techno merely readjusted his mental calculus and returned to his horse.

He worked through the night with the single-minded focus that consumed him during each of his hunts, not stopping to eat or even to rest. Luckily for him, the group was incredibly easy to track, once he found the place where they had entered the Woods. They moved with all the usual grace of a royal party, leaving plenty of footprints and broken branches for Techno to follow, visible even as the sun set and the night approached.

It was his favorite thing about hunting royalty, Techno thought as he pushed on through the forest. So used to staring down at everyone from their towers, they were oblivious to danger, thinking themselves immortal. Thinking themselves eternally at the top of the food chain.

By the time they usually realized they were his prey, the hunt was already over.

Techno didn’t recognize authority. It didn’t intimidate him. In his mind, he sat over everyone, a sword carefully balanced over every other person’s neck. It was up to him when they lived or died. That was true power, not the cheap pageantry of a crown and a castle.

Techno had decided that Clay’s time was up. And so it would be.

He grinned at the thought, and plunged deeper into the forest.

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George and Clay didn’t speak and barely even made eye contact with each other for the rest of the night. But in the morning, they went more or less back to normal, as though they had entered a silent agreement not to talk about their conversation.

Clay didn’t feel angry at George. More... unsettled.

George’s words had shaken something deep inside him. Something that had left him staring up at the stars last night, even after Sapnap had taken first shift, and Clay was supposed to be sleeping.

How had George known?

How had he known about Clay's purpose?

That tugging inside his chest, that voice in his head. Telling him, *there are greater things in store for you.*

He had never known how to name it before, never quite understood what it wanted from him. But now, George's words rang in his head.

*A king who will unite Albion into a time of peace.*

Could it be true? And if it was... where the hell was George getting this? And why wouldn't he tell him?

The three of them packed up camp and headed west, leaving the path of the river and returning to the dense forest. George rode ahead of Clay today, his head buried in the map, and Clay felt his gaze returning to the back of George's head over and over as they travelled. He was the same person Clay had always known. The same kind, dependable, harmless person.

Who was that other person who had taken over him last night? That person who, somehow, knew Clay better than he knew himself?

It filled him with unease, and he disliked the fact that they weren't talking about it. But there would be time for that, Clay knew, time to unpack what was going on between them. For now, they had a goal in front of them.

(And they had a Sapnap, who rode alongside them obliviously, humming an off-tune melody.)

After a while, the forest started to open up, the ground sloping gently downward, and then the three of them were riding through a large valley, with stony cliffs rising up on either side. The grass was soft under their horses' hooves, with only a few trees branching overhead.

"We're getting close," George said, and a shiver went down Clay's spine.

There was something strange about the valley, stranger, even, than the forest itself; there was a sort of electricity in the air that prickled at the back of Clay's neck, putting him on edge. He kept turning his head to see if someone was watching them, but there was never anybody there.

The valley eventually sloped back upwards and then emptied out back into the forest, and George pulled his horse to a stop, frowning at the map. "It should be around here."

There was nothing especially remarkable in sight; this stretch of the forest looked exactly like every other mile they had crossed over the past day and a half. "Are you sure?" Clay asked George, feeling his stomach start to sink.

"I'm sure," George said as Sapnap jumped off his horse and started to pick through the nearby forest, peering through the trees. "Look. You see the valley? And here, that's where we are -,"

"Well, it's not like this map is scientific, right?" Clay said. "It could be anywhere within, like, a ten mile radius."

George bristled a little. "The map's been accurate so far. It should be close."

“Guys?” Sapnap said.

“I’m just saying, it’s not very helpful right now,” Clay argued. “Like, the illustration of the sword itself is twice as large as the illustration for the lake, right? So, if you think about it, it could be -,”

“*Guys.*”

“What?” Clay snapped, before realizing that Sapnap was staring through the forest, his eyes wide.

The knight pointed. “Found it.”

George and Clay stopped for a stunned moment before dismounting, following Sapnap as he pushed through the forest.

They emerged in a small clearing. In the center of a little meadow, dappled with sunlight, stood a large, smooth boulder. Jutting from the stone, exactly as it was depicted on George’s map, was a sword.

“Excalibur,” George said with wonder, and Clay took a deep breath.

It was one thing believing it *could* exist, and another *seeing* it. The sword, though it must have been impossibly ancient, showed no sign of rust or deterioration. The handle was made of gold, finely engraved and embedded with emeralds, and the part of the blade that was visible and not hidden by the stone glinted in the sunlight. It was a remarkable-looking thing.

“*Well,*” Sapnap said, breaking their amazed silence, “let’s give this thing a whirl, shall we?”

Without further ado, he jumped on top of the stone and gave the handle a yank.

The sword didn’t budge. Sapnap grunted as he pulled at it, his arms straining, before finally letting go with a gasp of exertion. He turned to Clay, looking unsure.

“I don’t know, man,” he said. “I mean, I know there’s supposed to be magic here, or something, but... that thing’s really stuck in there.”

“Let me see,” George said with interest, and got up next to Sapnap to tug at the sword. It stayed similarly stuck.

Clay just stood and watched them, feeling some amount of anxiety rise in his chest, as his two friends combined their strength together only to fall away from the handle of the sword unsuccessfully.

“Okay, Clay,” Sapnap said, jumping down from the rock. “Showtime.”

George climbed down, too, watching Clay with a curious expression.

Hesitantly, Clay climbed up onto the stone, clenching and unclenching his hands a few times. He stood in front of Excalibur’s handle for a long moment.

“You got this, Clay,” he heard Sapnap say, but knowing his friends’ eyes were on him just made him feel slightly worse.

*You can do this*, he told himself in his head. *Whatever this is, you didn’t come here for nothing. You can do this.*

Clay reached out and grasped the handle. It felt warm under his hands. He readjusted his grip, took a deep breath, and then pulled it towards him.

It didn't budge.

Dread seized him, and Clay stared at the sword for a second longer, mentally begging it, *please, please move*.

He pulled it again, and was met with all the flexibility you would expect from a sword stuck in a literal rock.

Clay looked to his side, and he saw Sapnap staring up at him, his face mirroring the confusion and worry that Clay felt.

But when he looked at George, he saw something different.

George looked focused, and calm, and purely confident. The surety in his expression, the knowing way with which he looked up at him, was a sudden reminder of what, exactly, he was here to do. It reminded him of who he was.

Dream turned and drew Excalibur from the stone.

It slid out as easily as if it were simply sitting in a scabbard, waiting to be drawn. Dream's breath caught in his throat as he held the sword aloft, the blade glinting in the sunlight. He realized that the sword's glow was not merely a reflection of the light, but was something inherent to the iron itself: the blade seemed to remember the dragonfire it was forged in and shone with its memory.

The sword's handle was warm in his hands, and he felt energy tingle at his fingertips, as though Excalibur were a living thing, and they were meeting each other for the first time. Dream readjusted his grip, and a grin spread across his face. The sword was the perfect heft, its weight practically tailor-made. He swung it down in an easy arc.

This was *his* sword.

A low whistle pulled him away from his moment of reverie, and he turned to see Sapnap staring at him with amazement.

"What do you know," the knight said, shaking his head. "Just took some royal blood to get the job done. Looks like you got that translation dead on, George."

Dream made eye contact with George, who met his gaze unflinchingly, and his heart stuttered in his chest when he remembered the true translation, the one George had told him last night.

George's voice was full of pride as he said, "I know I did."

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George felt as though he were floating as they made their way back to their horses, Dream inspecting Excalibur with a wondrous expression. He looked like he was born to wield that sword, and George could feel the magic energy pouring off of the thing as clearly as he could feel the

warmth from the sun on his skin. Excalibur would be an important weapon against Mercia, and Dream was wielding it, and – everything was going perfectly.

They took off towards Camelot, stopping in the valley only briefly to eat a meal before the rest of the journey home. The Woods seemed much friendlier now, much more knowable. George let his guard down as they sat on a fallen log to eat, their horses grazing behind them.

“Can I just say, we just completely crushed this mission,” Sapnap said, pulling a laugh from Dream. “George, the next time you look for some mythic quest in your books, can you find one that’s actually challenging?”

Dream was still chuckling when an arrow sliced through the air and pierced Sapnap through his shoulder.

“*Sapnap!*” George shouted, shock paralyzing him, as the knight let out a startled cry and fell to the ground. George and Dream jumped to their feet, looking around frantically for the source of the arrow.

A second one whizzed right past George’s ear and he jerked away from it, scrambling for the shield that he had so confidently stowed away.

“Who’s there?” Dream shouted, hoisting his own shield in one hand and Excalibur in the other. He paced out into the Valley, scanning the surrounding cliffsides. “Show yourself, coward!”

After a moment, they heard the far-off sound of a horse whinnying, and then a figure appeared at the top of the northern cliff, riding a black horse. They watched as the stranger guided his horse down the side of the cliff, coming to a stop at the bottom of the valley, about a hundred feet away from them.

George peered at the man, and suddenly his eyes widened. He – he *recognized* this person, this tall, imposing figure with long hair, pulled back into a braid. He was wearing a thick, dark cape around his neck, and he held a long rapier in his hand. And George *knew* him. He had seen him in – in the castle, a few days before, in servant’s clothing. What was he doing *here* --?

“Who are you?” Dream yelled. “What do you want from us?”

“My name is Technoblade,” the man called back. His voice was low and calm. “Which probably answers your second question.”

The name sent a total shock through George’s system, and he took a few steps back. “The Blade?” he whispered, and saw Dream’s eyes widen in recognition. Technoblade was a near-mythic figure, half fiction, half reality.

“The assassin,” Dream said, and the Blade dipped his head. “Who sent you?”

“*Usually*, I wouldn’t say,” Technoblade said with a strange little grin. “But, on this occasion... Mercia asked me to send her regards.”

*Mercia.*

Techno swung himself off of his horse, taking off his cape and dropping it in a heap to the side. “I’m feelin’ nice, so I’ll make you an offer,” he said, hoisting his rapier. He didn’t hold a shield. “I’m only here for you, Clay. Give yourself up, and I’ll let your friends go. Otherwise, I’ll have to kill all three of you. Which I will.”

Dream scoffed and took a fighting stance. "I'd like to see you try."

The Blade smirked. "I was hopin' you'd say that."

The two of them took off towards each other at the same time, sprinting across the grass, and their blades clashed in the air, Excalibur against rapier. They surged against each other for a moment before pulling back, neither having gained the advantage.

"Clay!" George heard Sapnap yell, and he turned to see the knight rushing towards them, grabbing his sword.

Without flinching, Techno held up his free hand and shouted a word - "**ástríce**" - and slammed Sapnap against the cliff with his magic. Sapnap's head hit a rock hard, and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

George moved to try and help Dream, but the prince just threw up a hand in warning - "George, stay back! I can take him."

Technoblade grinned, and he shot George a sharp look that sent a chill down his spine. "Yeah, stay back, George," he called tauntingly, bringing his rapier down in a vicious arc that Dream parried with a clash. "Wouldn't want you gettin' hurt."

*Did he know?* George stumbled back a few feet, searching frantically for some way to help. When he saw a few roots tangled near the feet of the two fighters, he pulled one up to trip Techno, but the assassin must have noticed, because he hissed something under his breath and George felt something counteract his magic, rendering the act useless.

The Blade got a few good hits against Dream, knocking him back a few feet, but the prince caught himself, pivoting and striking out with Excalibur. He got a slash off against Techno's arm, but the assassin barely reacted, spinning and kicking out against Dream's chest, sending him back a few feet. Techno slashed his sword lightning-fast towards Dream's head, and he just barely dodged, stumbling a few paces away.

Frantically, George lifted a hand and focused on the handle of Techno's sword, making it glow with red-hot heat. The Blade dropped it with a hiss, and turned towards George furiously.

"Comin' out to play?" he asked, and then brought a hand up against George, using "**ástríce**" again.

With Dream's full attention on him, George had to let the spell do its work, slamming him against the cliff. Techno held him there, pinned against the rocks, for a moment, as the assassin picked up his blade and started to stalk towards him.

And then Dream launched himself in between the two, swinging Excalibur in a wide arc and forcing Techno to bring his rapier up to stop his attack.

"Leave him alone," he hissed, leaning into his sword and throwing the Blade back a few steps.

Techno smirked at him. "Cute."

George felt Techno's magic disappear and gasped for breath as the two continued to exchange blows, almost totally equal. He had never seen anyone fight Dream like this, with a sort of deadly precision in his every move; he dodged every swing of Dream's sword and seemed to anticipate his movements, forcing him into the defensive little by little. The Blade's rapier sliced

against Dream's arm, and then a particularly brutal swing just barely nicked Dream's face, opening up a gash on his right cheek.

Dream stumbled back, grabbing his face.

"They weren't kiddin' when they said you were good," Techno said, resetting his stance. "If it makes you feel any better about losin'."

Dream grit his teeth and launched back towards him.

George watched them fight with a pounding heart, pulling himself to his feet and looking for some way to help. He tried, again, to yank Techno's blade from his hand with magic, but when the other sorcerer felt the tug, he sent him a withering glare. With a grunt of exertion, the Blade lifted a large rock with his magic and sent it hurtling straight for George with incredible speed.

Yelping, George leaped to the side, but the boulder struck his knee with a crack, sending hot pain shooting up and down his leg. He fell to the ground, gasping in pain, as Dream shouted at the assassin.

"You would attack a defenseless servant like that? You really are a coward," the prince snarled.

That made something in Technoblade's face shift, and he returned his full attention to the prince. "And you really are an idiot, aren't you?"

George clutched at his leg as Dream and Techno clashed again, but something seemed to have taken over Dream. He fought with abandon, slashing at the assassin and whirling as though he weren't bleeding from several cuts already, while the Blade was practically unharmed.

His wild energy managed to push Technoblade back, put on the defensive, until the assassin was being pushed up against the cliff. For the first time, George saw a flicker of fear on the man's face as one of Dream's slashes sent his rapier flying to the ground, and then Dream lunged for his chest.

Technoblade held a hand up and shouted, "**ástríce**", trying to push Dream away as he had pushed Sapph and George.

But his magic didn't work.

As the spell hit Dream, Excalibur seemed to glow, and then it was like Dream was cutting through a wave of energy as it parted around him, leaving the prince untouched.

The Blade's eyes widened for one shocked second.

And then Dream ran Technoblade through with his sword.

George gasped as Excalibur hit true, plunging into the assassin's chest. Technoblade made a choking sound and fell to his knees in front of Dream.

Dream pulled Excalibur from the Blade's chest, who folded over his wound.

"This is Mercia's best attempt?" Dream spat, his sword and face both dripping with blood.

But then he made a mistake.

With an air of arrogance, Dream turned his back on the assassin, sheathing Excalibur at his

side. He took two steps away.

And then George watched in horror as Techno's sword pierced through Dream's back and burst through the front of his chest.

Dream's face morphed into a mask of shock as he looked down at where he had been stabbed, stumbling forward a little and crashing to his knees.

The Blade stood hunched behind him, breathing heavily, holding a hand over his wound. He ripped the rapier from Dream's body, and the prince cried out once, a loud and piercing sound, before collapsing to the ground.

*"NO!"*

The scream tore from George's mouth as the world started to spin, blood rushing in his ears. He lurched to his feet and started to limp towards the assassin, his magic flaming to life in his hands, but Technoblade muttered one last spell that twisted George's already injured leg and sent him crashing to the ground, his vision going white with pain. George clawed himself back to his feet, but by the time he got up, the assassin had disappeared. He was gone.

And Dream, Dream was folded over on the ground, blood pooling from his chest, staining the grass –

*"Dream,"* George gasped, and he lurched forward and fell to his knees next to his friend, panic nearly blinding him, "no, no, *no* -, "

He pulled Dream onto his back and onto George's lap, looking frantically for signs of life. Dream's face was ashen and colorless, his eyes closed, but George saw that his chest was still rising and falling shallowly. He was still breathing -- he was barely alive.

But George couldn't heal him.

*"Goddammit, Dream, goddammit,"* he whispered, his hands floating over Dream's face, over his chest, where the fatal wound still bled. He knew how to heal this wound, the way his gran had taught him, if he had time, and medicine – but he had neither. Dream didn't have much time left at all; he was fading, George could *feel him* fading, his breath was slowing, he was – he was fucking *dying* in George's arms, and George was *useless*, he was failing him –

*"This can't be happening,"* George cried, his voice breaking. He gathered Dream up in his arms and pulled him close to his chest, burying his face in Dream's shoulder, tears suddenly overflowing and streaking down his face. He heard Dream's faint breath, heard his weak pulse slowing.

And then the thought came to him, clear and strong:

*I won't let this happen.*

George closed his eyes.

He dove deep down into the well of magic he felt bubbling up inside of him. He pushed past it all, past the words and the spells, past, even, his instinctual knowledge of the elements – he sunk deep into the pure, liquid fire he could feel coursing through his veins when he used his magic, and he brought it out, he grabbed it by his fists, feeling the raw power of it scald him, and he told his magic what he wanted it to do.



“He can't die,” he cried, and his words resounded strangely in his ears, as though he were speaking with two voices, and his magic responded, *he won't*.

He felt like something was burning through his chest and when he opened his eyes, he saw golden tendrils bursting around him and Dream, wrapping the prince in warm light, settling over his chest; and he saw the wound left by Technoblade's sword start to close up, healing in a way George had never done before – in a way George didn't know was *possible*. He gasped and threw his head back, feeling energy surge through him with searing heat, lighting up every nerve, every cell in his body.

And then he channeled that energy through him, through his hands, as he placed one on Dream's chest and used another to cradle Dream's head. He pressed his forehead to Dream's and focused on a single thought.

*He won't die. He won't die. HE WILL NOT DIE.*

The golden light contracted and then swiftly expanded in one release, like an ethereal exhale –

And then Dream was gasping raggedly for air, color flooding his face.

George inhaled, feeling his magic taper off and then leave him completely, and he slumped in bone-deep exhaustion as Dream's eyes opened, blinking slowly up at him.

“...George?” he whispered hoarsely, and George choked back a sob. “What happened?”

“The assassin stabbed you,” George said, “but it's okay, it'll be okay. He ran away. I st- I stopped the bleeding.”

“You saved me?” Dream mumbled, a faint smile crossing his face as his eyes fell closed again. “Wh- who would've thought...”

George laughed breathlessly, sudden tears falling from his eyelashes.

And then he looked to the side.

And he saw Sapnap, crouching only a few feet away, staring at George with huge, terrified eyes.

George froze. The two of them looked at each other for an impossibly long moment as George's heart hammered in his chest.

Sapnap didn't move at all. He didn't even blink.

And then he tilted his head towards Dream, asking a silent, all-important question.

George shook his head.

Sapnap nodded slowly, his eyebrows knitting together. And then he mouthed, *later*.

Pure relief flooded through George's veins as he exhaled shakily and nodded as fast as he could, mouthing, *promise*.

---

Dream was barely conscious, and basically delirious.

They strapped him to his horse, fastening Excalibur to Sapnap's saddle, and started the long trek home right away. Dream was still bleeding, and he needed medical attention and rest.

They rode as long as they could before stopping. They didn't start a fire, fearful that Technoblade might still be lurking somewhere in the woods. George rebandaged their wounds: Dream's stab wound, Sapnap's arrow wound, and his injured leg; and then he and Sapnap helped Dream onto his sleeping mat, watching him roll over and immediately fall into a deep sleep.

The two of them stood together for a long moment. Then Sapnap paced away from Dream, and George followed him, his heart sinking slowly. They stopped about a dozen yards away, out of Dream's earshot but still close enough to keep an eye on him.

George didn't know what to say. He didn't even know how to start. His pulse hammered in his ears and he clenched his fists, waiting for Sapnap's reaction.

The knight's face was unreadable as he said, "you're magic."

George exhaled. "Yeah. I... I am."

Sapnap nodded, his forehead crinkling. "I, uh... I guess I'm probably pretty stupid for not realizing that sooner, huh?"

"No," George said, shaking his head. "Nobody knows. Not even Dream."

Sapnap shook his head. "Dude. How long has this been going on?"

"My whole life," George said, and Sapnap stared at him in open amazement.

"George."

"I was born with it," he whispered, and felt himself start to crack, overwhelmed by physical exhaustion and fear, and he buried his face in his hands for a moment. "I'm sorry, Sapnap, I -,"

Suddenly, Sapnap was hugging him.

It caught George completely by surprise, and a few unbidden tears fell from his eyes as he hugged Sapnap back, hearing the knight sigh heavily.

"You could have told us," Sapnap said, his voice low, and he pulled away from George. "I understand why you didn't, but we wouldn't have seen you any differently. *I* don't see you any differently."

George bit the inside of his lip to hold back another wave of tears and nodded. "I just... I couldn't know for sure," he said, and Sapnap nodded, his face sad.

"When are you going to tell him?" he asked, tilting his head towards Dream.

"I don't know. I – I just don't. It's been so long. I'm afraid he'll hate me for lying to him."

"He's not gonna hate you, George," Sapnap said. "Look – that much is obvious, okay? I mean, it seems to me like you've been helping him this whole time, right?"

George nodded.

“Right. So, I mean – yeah. Look, I don’t know what it’s like to be in your position, but you have to tell him soon. It’s only gonna get worse the longer you wait.”

“I know,” George said, his heart sinking. “I know. It’s just –,”

“Just what?”

“My whole job is to protect him,” George murmured, staring at Dream’s sleeping form in the darkness. “I’ve been doing it since we were kids. I need to be there to help him, especially now. With Mercia attacking... if he sends me away, I’m... I’m afraid of what might happen.”

And then he turned towards his friend, who was staring at him with concerned eyes. “Please, Sapnap. Please, you can’t tell anybody about this. I – I need to tell him myself. Or he’ll never forgive me.”

“I won’t,” Sapnap said after a pause, sending another flood of relief through George’s body. “But, George... you *have* to tell him soon. He’s not going to hate you, okay? You two... whatever it is, exactly, that you two have, you’re permanent. Clay’s not going to just throw you away.”

George bit his lip and ducked his head. “Thank you, Sapnap. I hope you’re right.”

“I usually am,” Sapnap said, his voice light-hearted, and he reached over to mess with George’s hair in a familiar gesture as they started to head back to camp. “By the way. When we get back, I’m getting you, like, fifty drinks. And you’re telling me all the awesome stories you’ve apparently been keeping all to yourself. Because, *apparently*, you’ve been a little badass this whole damn time.”

George went red, but he felt a genuine grin start to grow across his face. His heightened survival instincts were making it hard for him to fully internalize that he had just told one of his best friends about his magic – and that Sapnap was on his side. But the longer he spent thinking about it, the more wonderful the thought became.

“You know what?” he said, a hint of glee in his voice. “That sounds great.”

---

Dream drifted in and out of consciousness, pulled back and forth on an ocean of exhaustion and pain. When he woke up, he was cognizant of the bloody bandages wrapped around his arms and especially around his chest, but he couldn’t quite remember how they got there. He remembered fighting the assassin, who had fought like a demon out of hell; he remembered falling to the ground; he remembered waking up in George’s arms, staring up at his friend’s tear-stricken face.

He didn’t remember how he had survived, or how long they had been traveling home, but he supposed those details were unimportant. And as they continued their travel back to Camelot, which took twice as long due to their collective injuries, Dream started to gain more and more strength, sitting up in his saddle, feeling aware of his surroundings.

Excalibur sat at his side, and he was still alive. George and Sapnap were injured, but they were okay, too. They had completed their mission.

Now, Dream just wanted desperately to get back to Camelot. He wanted to see his father, who would surely forgive him his disobedience after seeing what the sword could do. He wanted to sleep in his own bed.

Dream had hardly felt more relieved than the moment they finally exited the Darkling Woods, the world opening up to the countryside around them. He took a deep breath and felt like it was the first fresh air he had tasted in days. The trio's spirits were high as they found the main path back to Camelot and started home.

But a few moments later, a figure appeared on the horizon.

There was a dark horse galloping full-speed towards them. An unknown person on its back.

Dream, Sapnap and George all tensed immediately. Dream grabbed Excalibur. Sapnap grabbed his bow. George just peered in the figure's direction.

Suddenly, his eyes went wide, and he held an arm out in front of Sapnap. "Guys, wait. It's – it's *Bad*."

Sapnap dropped his bow in astonishment as the figure grew closer and they saw that it was, actually, Bad, racing full speed towards them.

"Clay!" he shouted as he grew closer. He pulled to a stop in front of them and immediately dismounted. He looked disheveled and frantic. "Clay," he said, gasping for breath. "I'm – I'm so glad I found you."

"What's happening, Bad?" Dream asked urgently, jumping off of his horse along with George and Sapnap.

Bad looked at him, and the expression on his friend's face made his stomach twist into an awful knot, his heart dropping like a stone in his chest.

"There was an attack at the castle," Bad breathed, and somehow, Dream knew his next words before he said them, knew them in the way you suddenly know that something impossibly horrible is about to happen, and there's nothing you can do but stand there and let it wash over you.

"King Daniel is dead."

The words rocketed through the still air like cannon shots.

Clay could hardly comprehend what was happening. He just stared at Bad, the words repeating in his head, over and over. The only thing keeping him grounded to reality was the sound of his pulse racing in his ears.

"Clay," Bad said. "You're the King."

Suddenly, he dropped to one knee.

Clay looked down at him numbly. He turned and saw Sapnap, the knight's face pale and shocked, doing the same, bowing his head with a stunned expression.

Across from him, George stood upright, looking at him with the same strange expression he had on his face when Clay had pulled Excalibur from the stone. He didn't look surprised. He looked serious. Steadfast.

George dropped to one knee, and everything became real.

---

Everything else that happened, happened in a surreal, endless haze.

They rode back to Camelot silently, as fast as they could go.

Bad ushered them to the Great Hall. Clay's arrival – bloodied, but alive – caused a stir with the gathered group of councilmen and knights.

They exchanged stories of assassinations. Clay told the group that the Blade had claimed his attack on behalf of Mercia. The knights told Clay how another assassin had attempted to poison Daniel; when that attempt failed, the assassin had gained access to his quarters, and shot him with an enchanted weapon before fleeing the castle. George watched from the sidelines as Clay took in the news with a pale, shaken expression.

Clay was crowned within the hour. It was a subdued, solemn coronation, without controversy. Camelot had been attacked by another sovereign kingdom, villages burned and their king killed. George got the distinct impression, as each knight and advisor bent their knee in deference to the new king, that none of them would want to be in Clay's shoes at that moment.

When the ceremony was complete, Clay was besieged by his advisors, and George slipped out of the room to visit his grandmother, partially to see her, and partially to gather medical supplies. When he told her what had happened, his gran placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"You've already accomplished part of your goal," she said. "Clay is the king. Now, you have to keep him that way."

*Keep him alive, she meant,* George thought, as he headed back towards the castle, a basket of fresh bandages and medicinal herbs at his hip. From the castle grounds, he could see that Clay's window was lit up with light, and he took a deep breath, heading towards the king's quarters.

As he pushed through the doors, he saw Dream sitting on his bed, facing away from him. Dream flinched as the door squeaked open, but when he saw George, he relaxed slightly, turning away from him again.

"I have new bandages," George said, placing the basket down on the table. "For your wound."

Dream didn't turn. "Thank you, George. You can leave them there."

George hesitated. "I can help."

Dream waved his hand, and suddenly, George could see that his shoulders were hunched and shaking.

"Dream," he breathed, and he rushed around the side of the bed to see that Dream was crying, his face streaked with tears, and Dream crumbled at his voice, burying his face in his hands.

George knelt on the ground in front of him, grabbing his arms. "It's okay, Dream. It's

okay.”

“The last thing I did was fight with him,” Dream said, and then he was fully breaking down. George surged up, holding Dream in his arms, and Dream slumped into him, sobbing into his shoulder. “He – he was disappointed in me. He didn’t think I was ready to be king.”

There was nothing George could say, so he didn’t say anything. He just held Dream close, bringing one hand up to stroke the back of his head, running his fingers through his hair.

“What if he was right?” Dream whispered, and George pulled back to look him in the face. Dream looked awful, exhaustion and grief carving deep lines into his face. “What if I’m not ready? He – he was right about magic. He must have been. He -,”

“Don’t,” George cut him off. “Don’t think about that now, Dream, just...”

Dream took a shuddering breath and dropped his chin to his chest. “I don’t know how to do this, George, I... I don’t know how to be king. I don’t know how to win a war.”

George held onto Dream’s hands with his own. “You’ll learn, Dream. You *are* ready for this,” he said, and he tried to inject every ounce of confidence he had into his words. Tears kept falling from Dream’s eyes as George continued, “you remember what I said to you, don’t you? You remember what it meant, that you pulled the sword out of that stone. You were born to do this, Dream. It’s your destiny. And you won’t be alone.”

Dream’s hands trembled and he dropped his head again. “I... this is all so much. I just...”

“Right now, you just need to sleep,” George said, brushing Dream’s hair out of his face. Dream blinked at him. “You just need rest. We’ll figure everything out in the morning, okay?”

Dream nodded slowly, and George stood, but when he started to step away, Dream grabbed his hand, stopping him.

“George...” he said, and for a moment, his breath hitched in his throat.

"Will you stay?" he finished softly, his face vulnerable.

There was no way George could have said no. He touched Dream’s hand as he said, "Of course I will."

---

When Clay woke up in the morning, the first thing he saw was George, curled up on a chair close to his bed, sound asleep. The sight filled Clay with a soft, light feeling. George had stayed next to him until Clay had fallen asleep last night. He had slept sounder and deeper than he had in weeks.

Slowly, Clay stood from his bed, moving towards the window, where he looked out over the castle grounds. Though the physical and mental exhaustion from the events of the previous days still weighed heavily on him, his sleep had given him fortitude.

As he looked out the window over his kingdom, the reality of his situation finally started to sink in. An enormous challenge stood ahead of him, but he was ready to face it. He had to be.

The sun was rising. Clay was king.

And Camelot was at war.

## Chapter End Notes

this chapter was a doozy to write, and probably a doozy to read, too! I really, really hope you liked it!

can I just say? I've been having such a great time writing this fic! thank you so much to everyone following along, and especially to everyone who leaves comments :) I really love writing this story and it makes me really happy that others are enjoying it, too.

next week begins the three-part FINALE!! (aaaaaaa) see you then! <3

## twenty, pt. 1

### Chapter Notes

Hi :)

I really loved writing this chapter, and I hope you enjoy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

## TWENTY

Things in Mercia were... quite strange.

They had been for a while, Tommy supposed, but they were especially strange recently.

The group of sorcerers his mentor, Malcolm, had introduced him to that one time? Telling him they were an elite group of magic users who could help Tommy in the future? Well, Malcolm hadn't been wrong, because they were basically in charge now, calling the shots from what used to be King William's castle. Minx, that woman with silver hair and a wild gaze that had intimidated the shit out of Tommy – she had the most power, giving orders from the throne.

But Tommy wasn't so happy with how she was running things. Sure, he was glad he could do magic more openly now; it made his chores a lot easier, for one thing, and he had impressed a few girls his age with some of his best tricks. But under the Circle, acceptance of those who could do magic was being matched with outright prejudice against anyone who couldn't. Nobles without magic had disappeared mysteriously, and good citizens were being removed from their positions, replaced by those loyal to the Circle.

Well, that didn't sit right with Tommy. His best friend, Tubbo, who worked in the kitchen in Lord Wilbur's castle, couldn't use magic, but that didn't make him any lesser than Tommy. Tommy didn't like the sudden special treatment he was getting from Circle members, and he especially didn't like how they talked to Tubbo, like he was useless or stupid or something.

He suspected Wilbur didn't much like the Circle, either, although they never talked about it. If Tommy brought it up, Lord Wilbur's eyes would go guarded and he'd change the topic right away.

But they couldn't avoid the conversation any longer when Tommy waltzed into Wilbur's chambers one day, holding the boots Wilbur had asked him to mend, and saw him helping a blond man wrap bandages around a bleeding stranger. The wounded man was hunched over, breathing heavily, and blood dripped from his hands, staining the wooden floor.



“Uh.... Wilbur?” Tommy asked, dropping the boots, and Wilbur looked up at him with a grimace.

“Tommy, lock the door, would you?” Wilbur asked.

Tommy turned around numbly, doing so as he heard the wounded stranger hiss in pain.

“Just relax, Techno,” the blond man said.

Tommy’s eyes widened as he looked at Wilbur. “What is going on right now?”

Handing the bandages off to the other man, Wilbur grabbed Tommy by his arm and dragged him a little bit away. “These are some... old friends of mine.”

“Did that guy say Techno?” Tommy hissed. “As in, *Technoblade*?”

Wilbur winced. “Ah, well. Um...”

“He *did*,” Tommy said, and then was struck with an even greater revelation. “You’re *friends* with the Blade?!”

“Like I said,” Wilbur said, glancing back. “*Old* friends. Our paths diverged a long time ago.”

Tommy shook his head in astonishment. “Well, how the hell did he end up here?”

“It’s a long story, and it’s not important,” Wilbur said with a sigh. “What is important is what he just told me. Tommy, Mercia is going to war with Camelot.”

Tommy froze, dumbstruck. “Wh- what? But... why?”

“What other reason? Power,” Wilbur said grimly. “The Circle wants to take over each of the Five Kingdoms, by force, if they have to. And these two idiot anarchists just assassinated King Daniel.”

“They *hired us*, Wilbur,” the blond man said, having overheard them.

“That doesn’t mean you had to say *yes*, Phil,” Wilbur snapped, and Phil shrugged.

“It was supposed to be fun,” Technoblade said hoarsely, still folded halfway over.

Wilbur huffed in exasperation and turned back to Tommy, whose eyes were as large as dinner plates, information overloading his system. “Tommy, I know you have doubts, like I do, about what the Circle is doing to this kingdom. Phil and Techno just like to create chaos, but you and I – we don’t have that luxury. We have people to think of. Everyone in this city is living under my protection. They’re all going to be pulled into a violent, pointless war if we don’t do something to stop it.”

Tommy swallowed and drew himself up. “What do we do, Wilbur?”

Wilbur’s mouth set into a grim line. He looked back at the two assassins sitting in his quarters. Phil was tying off Techno’s bandages, whose breathing had evened out slightly, though his face was still pale, his long hair stained with blood.

“We bide our time, for now,” Wilbur said. “But I want you to be ready. When the moment is right, we’ll act. And these idiots are going to help undo the damage they’ve caused.”

“You don’t tell me what to do,” the Blade muttered.

“You owe me, Techno,” Wilbur said pointedly, and the assassin rolled his eyes.

“He’s not wrong,” Phil said, smacking Techno lightly over the head. “You’d be dead if it weren’t for him. We’ll help you,” he said to Wilbur. “Whatever you need.”

“Fine,” Technoblade gritted. “But if I see that royal asshole again, I’m not makin’ any promises.”

“Clay’s the king, now,” Wilbur said, and Tommy remembered, with surprise, that prince from Camelot he had met a few years ago – his servant, who he had befriended at the Tournament. He shifted his weight from foot to foot in excitement as Wilbur murmured, “I wonder what he’ll do.”

“Wilbur,” Tommy burst out, unable to contain himself any longer. “I think I have an idea.”

---

If Clay had ever grown tired of hearing the words *Prince Clay*, he was already a thousand times sicker of *King Clay*. Only a week into his reign, he felt he had been called by the latter title more times than he had in twenty years of the former.

It wasn’t so much the name itself that bothered him as the way it was being used: to wheedle, to flatter, to *coerce*. He could see it in the faces of so many of the people who came to him. Everyone who spoke to him wanted something from him, and it was growing more and more difficult to tell who had good intentions and who was just being manipulative.

An aide, bowing in formalistic deference: “King Clay, do you intend to keep the same heads of estate? I have some suggestions, if you don’t mind...”

A blacksmith, twice his age: “King Clay, we’re in need of more help in the armory, may we pull extra hands from the kitchens?”

A knight, spreading his hands over an enormous map: “King Clay, who should take control of the patrols of the outer villages?”

A nobleman, masking fear under a veneer of importance: “King Clay, we need more troops deployed to *my* fiefdom. We have the kingdom’s most important supply of grain, after all.”

Each face, each request, a puzzle, a balancing act. Clay responded to each in turn, monitoring his tone, monitoring his words, monitoring his decisions, making sure he acted fairly and spoke with confidence, projecting the image of a competent leader that his people needed as Camelot marched steadily towards war.

It was completely and utterly exhausting.

The only people he felt truly safe around these days were Sappnap, Bad, and George, of course – and those were exactly the people who surrounded him as he stood in the Great Hall on the evening of his seventh night as king, staring, once more, at the map of Camelot that was spread out on the table. It was sprinkled with marks – signifiers of conflict. Mercia had continued their sporadic attacks on Camelot villages, seemingly at random. The assaults had only grown more

frequent.

And Camelot had lost every single battle.

“We need to find a way to predict their next move,” Bad was saying, peering at the map through his glasses. “If we can intercept them before they start attacking, maybe we can gain the element of surprise.”

“It doesn’t even matter, though,” Clay said, his brow furrowed in frustration. “As long as they have this endless army of sorcerers on their side, we’re guaranteed to lose every fight.”

“The knights have been getting better at learning how to combat magic,” George said. Clay had been inviting him to most of these meetings, giving him more informal responsibility. Although it drew some raised eyebrows from his father’s former advisors, Clay couldn’t care less. He trusted George’s judgement implicitly. “And Excalibur will help, too.”

“Yes, but I can’t be everywhere,” Clay said. Agitated, he knocked his knuckles against the table a few times. “I’m finally starting to see what my father meant when he warned me about the danger of magic. This is... this is starting to look like a losing battle.”

Sapnap’s mouth was set in a grim line, and he absently touched a scar along his jaw he had earned in his most recent skirmish with Mercian sorcerers. “Well... is there a way we can fight back using magic, too? Fight fire with fire?”

“No way, Sapnap,” Clay said, shooting him a look.

“Why not?”

“I might as well just go trample all over my father’s grave,” he said, and it was harsh, but true.

Sapnap flinched. “Come on, Clay. You disagreed with Daniel about this stuff all the time.”

“Yeah, and then a sorcerer killed him, and another one tried to assassinate me,” Clay snapped. “So. Guess who was probably right.”

It was more complicated than that, and Clay knew it, and didn’t miss the way George’s face kind of fell at his words, dredging up old memories.

Clay felt a guilty pang in his chest, but shoved it down. Daniel hadn’t been perfect... but he had always kept Camelot safe. And Clay couldn’t help but feel, with a twist of fear in his stomach, that he was already starting to fail in that regard.

The strained moment was interrupted by the sound of the doors opening, and the four men turned to see the royal guard escorting somebody in. It was an unexpected visit, and King Clay pulled himself up, walking around the table to meet the newcomer.

The stranger was dressed in finely tailored noblemen’s clothing. He had a dark beard and bright, focused eyes, and he seemed to carry no weapons. As he reached Clay, he bowed deferentially.

“Your Highness,” he said. His voice had a measured tone to it. “I am your humble servant.”

“Who are you? Where do you hail from?” Clay asked.

The man rose. "My name is Schlatt. I come from Nemeth."

Sapnap snorted from behind Clay. "Strange name."

Schlatt's eyes narrowed slightly at the knight. "I could say the same to you," he said lightly, "Sir Snapnap, was it?"

Clay felt Sapnap bristle behind him, but ignored the little exchange. "What is your purpose in Camelot?" he asked.

Schlatt turned back to Clay. "Your Highness, I come with news of an impending attack. An attack from Mercia."

Clay clenched his jaw. "I thought Nemeth was unwilling to help us in this war." It had been a sharp blow. Nemeth was Camelot's closest ally, yet they had closed their doors to Clay entirely.

"Nemeth might be," Schlatt shrugged, "but I'm not. I see what these magic users are doing to Mercia. They're trying to take over. First Camelot, next the world, right? Well, frankly, I'm not interested."

Clay narrowed his eyes. There was something strange about the man, something he couldn't quite place. He had this disarming, casual air about him, and there was an undercurrent of danger in the way he acted; he was clearly intelligent, capable, and his gaze was sharp. Yet he hadn't done anything to disrespect Clay – and certainly hadn't made any threats. "How do you know about this attack?"

"I've been seeing troops mobilizing on the border near Nemeth. Went and talked to a few soldiers, just to see what was up. Turns out, they're plannin' on attacking Whiteacre. Two days from now."

The name nearly punched the breath out of Clay. Whiteacre was one of Camelot's most important strongholds, a major city close to the kingdom's border, and an important source of food for the entire country. An attack on Whiteacre would be disastrous.

"You're sure about this?" he asked, and Schlatt nodded firmly.

"Listen," he said. "I'll be upfront with you. I can lead you to their camp tomorrow, if you want. But I'm not doin' this out of charity."

"You'll be paid well, if what you say is true," Clay said, and Schlatt dipped his head.

"King Clay," he heard George say, and when he turned around, George's forehead was furrowed. "Can we talk about this?"

Clay hesitated, then turned back towards Schlatt. "Give us a few minutes."

Schlatt's gaze had landed appraisingly on George, but slid smoothly back to Clay. "Of course," he said, and followed the guards out of the Hall.

As the doors closed heavily, Clay turned back towards the table. "Well. What do you guys think?"

Bad hesitated. He took off his glasses and cleaned them on his shirt. "I don't know. It's hard to tell."

“Whiteacre makes sense as Mercia’s next target,” Sapnap said, tapping his fingers against the table. “I mean, it’s believable.”

“What do you think?” Clay asked George, whose face was still clouded.

George pressed his lips into a thin line. “I don’t know, Dream,” he said honestly. “I... I don’t think I like this guy.”

“Neither do I,” Clay said. His newly deepened sense of paranoia itched at him insistently. But Camelot needed an ally, desperately. “I mean... at least Schlatt is being honest about what he wants out of this whole thing. Weirdly, I can sort of respect that. If he wants to get paid, we’ll pay him.”

George shrugged, though he didn’t look convinced.

“Listen, I’m not totally sold on this, either,” Clay said. “But... do we have any other option? I mean... what happens if we ignore this, and Whiteacre *is* attacked?”

“We could just fortify the city,” Bad suggested.

“Right, and then we’d lose, just like we’ve lost every other time,” Clay said. “If we want any chance at winning, we need to catch them by surprise. That’s what Schlatt is offering us.”

The four stood in silence for a moment.

“It’s up to you, Clay,” Sapnap eventually said. “Whatever you decide, we’ll be behind you.”

And that was the problem, wasn’t it? The responsibility would rest with him, ultimately. For the rest of his life.

The thought weighed as heavily on his head as his crown did as Clay paced around the table, sitting on the throne and rubbing his face, thinking.

This was a risk. But it was a risk that could lead to a victory. And Clay needed a win. His knights – his *kingdom* needed a win. They needed to know that victory was *possible*.

For a moment, Clay made eye contact with George, and his servant held his gaze. It was so different from the way other people looked at him these days. It wasn’t disrespectful, but it wasn’t fearful or fake, either. George was actually looking at him. At *him*. Not at *King Clay*. And he had that funny expression he got sometimes, that expression that left Clay’s chest with a sort of burning ache. That expression – like George had full and total trust in Clay, no matter what.

“Fundy,” Clay called out, and the knight, who was standing by the door, stepped forward. “Tell Schlatt that we’ll take him up on his offer.”

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A few hours later, a fire was burning steadily in the hearth in Dream’s room, and George stood by the dressers, arranging things for the journey tomorrow. His mind swirled as he worked, still trying to digest the events of the day. It was late, already hours after sundown, yet Dream hadn’t returned to his quarters yet; he was busy making his own preparations.

George worried about him, and though that was nothing new, it had recently become especially justified. Dream had been saddled with so much, from the instant he became king – nearly unfathomable responsibility. He looked tired all the time, dark circles ringing his eyes. George suspected he wasn't sleeping well, if at all.

It made George's chest hurt. He wished there was something he could do to fix it. He wished he could be more of use in the war, but even with Sapnap's help prompting the idea, Dream had been more closed off to the thought of using magic than ever. There was even a part of him – however small – that wished he could have prevented, or at least delayed, Daniel's assassination. Because as much as George had hated the former king, Dream was obviously haunted by his ghost. He had even refused to move into the master bedroom, unable to face the place where his father had died.

But because he couldn't do either of those things, he just tried to do as much as he could to take things off of the king's shoulders. They were small things, usually, but that was meant to be his role as Clay's servant, anyway.

He heard the doors open and shut, and he looked up to see Dream leaning against the closed door, leaning his head back against it with a sigh. He looked utterly exhausted, lines wrinkling his forehead and the corners of his eyes.

"Are you hungry?" George asked.

Dream dropped his head and blinked blearily at George, as though he was just now noticing him. "Do you have food?"

George pointed at a small tray of bread and dried fruit on the table, and Dream sat down with a pleased sound. George closed the dresser doors, then walked towards him, hopping up to sit on the edge of the table, facing Dream. "How do you feel?"

Dream avoided his gaze. "I'm fine."

He was deflecting, and George narrowed his eyes. "You don't have to do that around me, you know."

"Do what?"

George lifted his shoulders briefly. "Act like everything is fine."

Dream paused, and then looked at him, and George held his gaze, his stomach sort of flipping under his stare. He had a strange expression on his face.

"I guess I don't, do I?" Dream eventually murmured. He dropped his face into his hands, sighing.

George waited expectantly. The fire filled the room with warm, orange light, and shadows danced lightly on the walls. Eventually, Dream let his hands fall against the table.

"George," he said with a short laugh. "Sometimes I feel like you're the only person who actually talks to me like I'm a real person. And not just... *the king*."

"Sapnap and Bad do, too," George said.

"Well, sort of, but... it's different."

George's heart faltered in his chest at the words, because he understood them perfectly, and they were dangerous.

The neckline of Dream's tunic had sort of flipped inside out, and George couldn't resist the urge to reach out and fix it, smoothing his hand over Dream's collarbone. If Dream shivered a little under the touch, he pretended not to notice it.

"Your chainmail was fixed," he said instead, pulling his hand away and seeing Dream's eyes flicker down. "We should make sure it fits tonight, before we leave tomorrow."

For some reason, his last phrase seemed to alarm Dream, but he nodded after a pause, putting down his food. "Okay."

George went to get the newly-crafted armor. When he returned, Dream was standing near the dresser, his forehead kind of pinched.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"It's nothing," Dream said quickly, and although it was another deflection, George let it rest for now. He moved Dream's arms and started to fit the armor into place, his deft hands making quick work of the task. He felt Dream's gaze burning into him the whole time and tried to ignore it, keeping his eyes focused on the job at hand. The armor was clearly a perfect fit, even without adjustments; and George already had most of it off again by the time Dream spoke.

"I don't think you should come with me tomorrow," he said as George took off his last gauntlet, and the words were so unexpected that George jerked his head up in shock.

"Why not?" George asked, his heart jumping in his chest.

Dream bit the inside of his lip. "You're still recovering from your injuries."

"So are you," George said defensively.

"But I've healed much quicker than you," Dream said, hesitating: "somehow."

It was true. Dream's chest wound had been halfway healed by George's little explosion of magic, and George was still limping on his injured leg. But that didn't matter – certainly not enough to stop him from coming to the battle.

"That can't be your actual reason," George said, crossing his arms.

Dream paused, and then seemed to try a different angle: "I need someone to stay at the castle. Someone I can trust."

"Find someone else," George said.

Dream sighed and suddenly his face was sort of annoyed. He said dryly, "what if I just tell you that I'm ordering you to, huh, George? What if I just say, I'm the king and I'm telling you so. Is that enough of a reason?"

"Nope," George said simply, turning to put the gauntlet down, because Dream wasn't being serious. "I'm coming with you."

"George," Dream said, catching his hand and pulling him back. "Just - listen to me."

In the flickering, orange light of the fireplace, George realized that Dream was *worried*, his

forehead lined, his eyes concerned. His breath caught in his throat as Dream continued:

“You’re my best friend, and – and you’re the bravest person I’ve ever met. You actually are,” he said quietly. “I mean – you’re a servant, George, yet you keep throwing yourself into these situations like you’re a trained knight. But you’re *not* a knight, and I can’t protect you in battle. I know you want to come anyway, because I know you want to help defend this kingdom. Which is why I think you should stay here. I need someone I can trust who can stay, who can watch over Camelot while I’m gone. That’s the best way you can help protect this kingdom right now. And – and it’ll keep *you* safe, too,” he ended, his voice catching a little on his last words.

The sharp ache in George’s chest took his breath away for a moment. He knew Dream meant what he was saying. But he had everything all backwards. And even if George couldn’t tell him everything, he could at least tell him one truth – a truth that suddenly threatened to swallow him whole if he didn’t tell Dream this instant. Dream, who was standing there, staring at George like he was something indescribably precious.

“We’re different, Dream,” he said quietly, and Dream’s brow furrowed. “We’re different. Everything you do, you do for Camelot, you do for your people. That’s rare, and it’s incredible. It’s what will make you the greatest king Camelot has ever seen. But I’m not like that.”

“George –,”

George put a hand against Dream’s chest, stopping him. He could feel Dream’s heartbeat race under his fingertips. He was suddenly hyper-aware of every place where they touched. Every place where they were almost touching.

“Everything I do, I do for you, Dream,” George said, and Dream’s eyes widened. “I don’t care about *anything* like I care about you. Not this kingdom. Not – not even my own life.”

The words felt heavy as they left his mouth, and they also felt true.

Trembling slightly, George picked up Dream’s hand and pressed it to his mouth, closing his eyes and hearing Dream’s breath hitch. He placed his chin on top of their clasped hands and opened his eyes, meeting Dream’s gaze, dark and questioning.

“My place is with you,” he said.

Dream took a shuddering breath, his eyelids flickering, and his gaze dropped to George’s mouth, and George’s heart was a steady drumbeat in his chest, his instincts telling him *be careful, be careful, be careful* –

But those thoughts fell away to ash when Dream surged forward, grabbing George’s face and capturing his lips with his own, and George kissed back as though his life depended on it, clutching the front of Dream’s shirt as his back gently hit the front of the dresser. Dream’s hands cupped George’s face, traced down his neck, down his side to his waist, leaving trails of dying embers wherever he touched. George gasped, wrapping his arms around Dream, and Dream kissed him again, like a tidal wave, pushing forward and sweeping him up.

After a timeless moment – it could have been seconds or hours – Dream broke away, and in his face, George saw everything swirling in his own chest mirrored back at him – the amazement, and the adoration, and the wanting, like a raw nerve.

“George,” Dream said in a sort of broken way, and George was overwhelmed by the torrent of emotion in his chest, overwhelmed by the feeling of touching Dream like this, finally, *finally*. He



brought a hand up just to feel Dream's face, brushing a thumb over his mouth and smoothing his fingers over his cheek, and George felt Dream melt into his hand.

"It's decided, then," he said, with a little grin. "I'm coming with you."

Dream's face broke into an exasperated smile, and he laughed into another kiss, slower and sweeter, this time, like he knew they had all the time in the world. Dream started trailing kisses across George's jaw and down his neck, sending gentle shivers down George's spine as he squeezed his eyes shut and willed the universe to pause, to let them live in this moment forever, where they were safe and they loved each other and everything was perfect.

---

George woke up before Dream did, like normal. But, distinctly abnormally, he woke up curled in Dream's arms, staring up at his peaceful, sleeping face. And for a moment, he couldn't bring himself to do anything but nuzzle into Dream's chest, feeling him reflexively pull George a little closer in return.

He had stayed with Dream last night – couldn't bear to leave, especially after Dream told him, in a whisper, about the nightmares that had kept him up for nights on end. They had both slept soundly, safe and warm, and the thought made George's chest light up with a warm glow, a feeling that he thought might never fade.

But it did start to fade, as all good things eventually do, when he saw the sun coming through the windows, and he knew it was almost time for them to leave.

"Dream," he hummed, and Dream made a low sound of protest in his throat, his eyes still closed. "Dream, we have to get up."

Dream placed one large hand directly over George's face. "Shut up, George."

George couldn't help but laugh into Dream's palm for a second before peeling his hand away. "Come on. You have to help me sneak out of the window."

A low chuckle bubbled up from Dream's throat, and he opened his eyes, grinning playfully. "Ah. Of *course*. We can't let the castle gossipers catch wind."

But even though it was a joke, George's laugh suddenly stuck in his throat, and his face fell as a storm of cloudy thoughts overtook his mind.

Dream seemed to notice, and when George opened his mouth to speak, he propped himself up on his elbow, holding up a finger in warning. "Don't," he said softly, raising his eyebrows. George closed his mouth. "Don't overthink it. Don't worry about anything right now. Okay?"

"But-,"

Dream put his finger on George's mouth, stopping him. "I said *don't*," he said again, a mock-frown on his face. "That's an order."

George narrowed his eyes as Dream got out of bed, stretching. "We have to talk about it at some point."

“We will,” Dream said simply, reaching for his traveling clothes and moving towards the partition. “When we get back from the battle.”

*The battle.* George’s chest froze up, the warm glow officially dissipated. He sat up in bed as Dream got changed behind the wooden partition, throwing his nightclothes over the side, and stared into space. In the clear light of morning, his heart sunk for more reasons than one.

George had *told* himself. He had told himself he wouldn’t do this, wouldn’t *let* himself do this, until he was being honest with Dream – fully honest with him. But now it was too late. He had failed.

So... did he tell Dream about his magic now? Hours before they marched into battle?

Dream would be upset – he knew that much. Even if Dream came around eventually, he would be upset - at least at first. If George told him now, Dream would go into battle conflicted, confused. He would probably force George to stay in Camelot, unable to trust him.

And right now... everything was okay. And Dream was happy.

He came around the partition, his shirt half-buttoned, and the glimpse of his bare chest made George flush, stupidly, even though he had seen Dream half-dressed a thousand times before. Dream noticed and smirked, coming towards him.

“Like what you see?” he asked with a big, cocky smile.

“You’re such an idiot,” George said, pretending to push Dream away as he leaned over him. “Stay away from me, you cretin.”

“Oh, come on,” Dream teased. He swooped down and stole a kiss, and George couldn’t help but melt into it. They broke apart and Dream’s eyes practically danced.

“Are you gonna be able to control yourself on this trip?” George asked, and Dream threw back his head and laughed, which brought back that warm feeling in George’s chest and banished his thoughts from earlier. It was like Dream said – they would talk later. George would tell him everything, and it would be a hard conversation, but it would be fine. They had time for all of that – they had plenty of time.

“I’ll be fine,” Dream said, mussing with George’s hair. “Now, come on.”

When they were both dressed and about to walk out of the room, Dream stopped him, and his face went serious for a second.

“I want you to be careful today,” he said, his gaze flickering over George’s face. “I’ll be glad to have you there, but if you get in trouble – just get out of there, okay? Just... keep yourself safe. Please,” he added, softly.

George nodded up at him, and he said, “I will, Dream.”

*And I’ll keep you safe, as well,* he promised silently, and the thought, which was strong enough to spark a flame in his chest on any other day, today started a forest fire.

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You could have cut the tension in the air with a knife, if you felt brave enough to bring out any sort of weapon in front of a dozen armed knights of Camelot.

The group of knights rode through the forest silently, following a back path towards the shared border that joined Camelot, Nemeth and Mercia. Clay rode in front, next to Schlatt, who guided them. George and Sapnap rode slightly behind him, and then came the rest of the knights: Eret, Ponk, Callahan, and several older knights who were the most experienced in combat. Schlatt had estimated a dozen knights would be enough to take on the small squadron he had seen on Nemeth's border. Bad, and the rest of the guard, had been left to watch over the castle, a genuinely important task.

Although the pure happiness of his past several hours with George had left Clay's chest feeling lighter than it had in months, the reality of the task ahead of him had firmly set in the moment he had stepped foot outside the castle and seen the other knights, fully armored and wielding their weapons. They were serious, their faces dark and focused. Several of them were already scarred and injured from Mercian attacks. Clay himself was no exception.

Before they had left, Clay had turned to speak to them.

"Today is our first and best chance at taking the Mercian army by surprise," he told them, willing his voice to ring with confidence. "If we win today, we will send them a message, once and for all. That even with their tricks, even with their sorcery and their cowardice, we can, and will, defeat them in this war. I have chosen you all particularly, because you are our strongest and most noble fighters. I know you will serve Camelot well today and make her proud."

There was a heart-stopping moment where Clay had felt that the men's faces were blank and unresponsive. If the knights didn't trust him enough to follow him into battle, the war was already lost.

But then Sapnap had stepped forward and lifted his sword in the air. "For King Clay, and for Camelot!" he said, and immediately the other knights stepped forward as well, their shouts ringing out: "For King Clay, and for Camelot!"

Clay exhaled in quiet relief and nodded to them, lifting Excalibur in the air. "For Camelot," he echoed them firmly, and then they had been off.

"We're getting closer," Schlatt said, pulling Clay from his thoughts. He looked towards the man from Nemeth, who was as impenetrable as ever. Schlatt gave Clay a small smile, motioning around them. "See how the terrain's changing? That's Nemeth for you."

He was right – different from the sloping woods and forests of Camelot, the terrain was becoming rockier, the hills steeper. Nemeth was a mountainous terrain; they must have been getting close to the border.

"And you're sure you remember exactly where you last saw the Mercians?" Clay asked again.

"I remember perfectly," Schlatt said.

Clay glanced over his right shoulder and caught a glimpse of George, craning his neck to look at the tall cliffs that now rose on either side of the path. And for all the confusion and uncertainty that was consuming everything else in Clay's life, looking at George put all those thoughts to rest, leaving his mind peaceful and clear. He knew George, completely, and now George knew him. After last night, it was like the last piece of the puzzle between them had finally

fit into place.

Clay turned back around before he could be accused of gawking, feeling even more focused on the task at hand. They would win this battle, he knew it. And things would get better.

Suddenly, Schlatt pulled his horse to a stop.

“Here we are, boys,” he said cheerfully.

Clay looked around in confusion. They were standing in the middle of the road, steep cliffs rising up on both sides. It was completely silent and still, and the knights looked at each other in bewilderment.

“What’s going on?” he asked Schlatt harshly. “There are no Mercians here.”

“Aren’t there?” Schlatt asked with a grin.

And then a shower of arrows was raining down on their heads.

“SHIELDS!” Clay cried, lunging for his own, and bringing it up just in time – two arrows embedded themselves in the wood, and he turned frantically to see most of the other knights crouching under their own shields, though Ponk took an arrow to the shoulder with a shout.

And suddenly, there were a dozen – no, two dozen, no, *fifty* Mercian soldiers at the tops of the cliffs, dressed in green and silver, and all of them shouting a war cry as another volley of arrows arced through the sky.

Clay blocked another arrow as he whirled towards Schlatt, but the man was already gone. “*Damn it!*” he screamed, panic threatening to choke him before he pushed it down, turning to his men. “*Retreat!*” he shouted. “We’ve been ambushed – *retreat!*”

There was no way to win this fight, no way in hell, Clay knew, as he blocked another arrow; they were outnumbered and cornered in a sort of canyon, sitting ducks, easy targets. He cursed Schlatt, cursed himself, cursed the name of every god he could think of as he and the knights started racing back from where they came from, their horses kicking up dust.

Suddenly, he heard someone shout a word in a strange language, and his horse made an awful sound, rearing up on its hind legs and throwing Clay off. He hit the ground hard and his horse galloped frantically away, disappearing into the dust.

“King Clay!” someone cried, the knights pausing, and he shouted, “*go*, get out of here!”

But it was too late. More sorcerers appeared at the top of the cliff, and the knights who weren’t thrown off their horses were soon clashing swords with soldiers who slid down the side of the cliffs, lunging at them with vicious swings.

Clay scrambled to his feet just in time to block a blow from a lanky, leering man, who flew at Clay like he was possessed. Clay’s mind spun into overdrive as he blocked the man’s advances, using his wicked speed against him as he anticipated his motion, threw a leg forward and sent him sprawling to the ground.

He spun around and saw the other knights clashing with the Mercians – Sapnap lashing away two soldiers, Callahan falling back under a sword. Everything was dissolving into chaos, and suddenly he saw Eret galloping towards him, miraculously still on his horse.

“What do we do, sire?” Eret shouted.

“Run,” Clay said hoarsely. “Tell everyone – grab who you can and get the hell out of here. Back to Camelot! This is a death trap!”

Eret nodded and spurred his horse forward, disappearing into the dust.

As he watched him go, Clay suddenly felt a strange push at his back, like something was shoving him forward. Turning, he saw a sorcerer standing at the top of the cliff behind him, chanting in that awful language.

Frantically, Clay brought Excalibur up in the air, and -- just like when he had fought against Technoblade -- he saw it glow with that internal light, breaking through whatever spell was being cast, and he surged forward, unharmed. The sorcerer looked shocked as Clay scaled the cliff in a few leaps, striking him down and sending him tumbling into the canyon.

Clay looked down, trying to see who was still in the valley. He saw Eret pulling an injured Ponk away – he saw Sappnap throwing a soldier off his horse and leaping onto its back, using the vantage point to slash down two more Mercian attackers –

And he saw George throwing a soldier to the ground with his shield, plunging his sword into his chest.

His heart seized, and he immediately slid back into the canyon, rushing towards George, who heaved for breath, pulling his sword back out.

“George,” he said, grabbing his shoulder, and George turned wildly, his face pale. “We have to get out of here.”

George nodded, but a sudden shout pulled their attention to the cliff.

“He’s here!” screamed a sorcerer dressed in green robes, pointing directly at them. “The king, he’s here!”

And another wave of Mercians raced towards them.

Clay ducked under the swing of one sword and ran the man through easily, shoving him into one of his compatriots and sending them both tumbling. He saw George parry a strike with his sword and capably fight another man back, and he turned to slash at another sorcerer, Excalibur glowing as it sliced through her spell. He just had to hope they wouldn’t target George –

Three soldiers suddenly rose up in front of him at once, and Clay yanked his shield up, feeling the impact of two, three hits – he stumbled back and nearly tripped over the rocky ground, striking out at the nearest man but seeing him jump away, and then the other one was lunging for his exposed side –

Suddenly, all three of his attackers were flung against the side of the cliff, launched with the same force Clay had seen the sorcerers using on his own men. The Mercians hit the wall hard and fell to the ground, stunned.

Clay whirled around, looking at the tops of the cliffs for who might have done that – was it a misfire, was it intentional? – but he didn’t see anyone. The only person he could see was George, who was faltering under the onslaught of two Mercian soldiers, both towering over him by at least half a foot. His stomach lurching, Clay rushed towards him –

But he was too late. He watched, helplessly, as one of the soldiers knocked George's shield to the ground, and the other swung his sword in a vicious arc.

The blade hit true, and George hit the ground with a cry, a wound opening up across his chest.

"No!" Clay shouted, and the soldiers turned – but their fates were already sealed.

Clay slashed Excalibur against the first man's neck and pushed him away, turning to the second and kicking him square in the chest, sending him to the ground. He rushed him and stabbed his blade through his heart.

And then Dream turned and saw George curled over himself, clutching his bleeding chest.

"George," he gasped, and was at his side immediately. "How bad is it?"

George's face was pained. "I'll be okay," he gasped, but he doubled over again. "Ah – I – need to get out of here –,"

"We're leaving, now," Dream said, looking up, but unable to see where the rest of his men were – the dust and chaos were both too thick for him to make heads or tails of what was happening. He had told his men to retreat, and now they had to retreat. "Come on, come on. I've got you."

He sheathed Excalibur, slung George's arm over his shoulders and pulled him up the side of the cliff, hearing shouts growing closer from the Mercian army, and they limped into the trees, George gasping for air. After a few labored strides, George tripped and hit the ground, and Dream knelt next to him, freezing for a moment, listening to see if they were being followed.

"They went this way!" he heard a shout from the battleground, and caught sight of a green-robed sorcerer starting in after them.

Immediately, Dream scooped George up in his arms and started to run. George felt like he weighed nothing at all, though maybe that was just the adrenaline, and Dream crashed through the forest as George clung to him. He could hear the sorcerer pursuing them, just a little ways away, and he desperately pushed himself faster.

But as he broke through a line of trees, he realized with a sick jolt that he had run himself straight into a dead end. An enormous, rocky cliff, practically a mountain, rose up sharply in front of him, far too steep and full of loose rocks for him to climb.

Dream turned but the sorcerer was breaking through the trees, as well, and the man threw out a hand, shouting "**ástríce!**"

Without Excalibur, the spell did its work: Dream felt an invisible force pick them up and throw them towards the cliff face. He slammed into the rock wall, and he and George both fell to the ground; Dream rolled to a stop on his stomach, while George landed on his back, crying out sharply with pain.

The blow stunned Dream, and as he tried to push himself up, groping blindly for his sword, the world spun dizzily around him, and he reeled back to the ground.

The sorcerer faced them from the top of the hill.

"Finally," he said, and lifted a hand, chanting, "**stanas!**"

There was a sound from above him, like a great rumble of thunder, and Dream turned to see an enormous boulder suddenly tumbling down the cliff, picking up momentum as it jumped and bashed against the side of the hill, starting a rockslide that had half the mountain headed directly for their heads.

He didn't have time to act, didn't have time to think - so Dream moved purely on instinct. He threw himself over George, bracing himself with his forearms on either side of George's head and burying his face in George's shoulder, waiting for the crushing blow.

But the blow never came.

Instead, Dream felt George's hand on the back of his neck – felt George lurch forward, using Dream's weight to pull himself up.

And the sound stopped. Everything stopped. All Dream could hear was his pulse in his ears, and George's breath, as he panted for air.

Dream lifted his head, and he saw George trembling, staring straight up, his right arm extended into the air and shaking with effort.

Then he looked behind him, and he saw the boulders were frozen, suspended in mid-air only a few feet above their heads. It was so surreal that, for a second, Dream wondered if time had stopped still.

But it hadn't. With a gasp, George wrenched his arm to the side, and the rocks followed his motion, hurtling towards the Mercian sorcerer. The first boulder crashed into him, crushing him against the tree behind him, and he fell lifelessly to the ground. The rest of the rocks tumbled harmlessly to the ground, rolling to a clattering stop.

George collapsed, going limp under Dream, and the two were left staring at each other, frozen for a long, incredible moment.

Dream felt as though he were moving outside of his body as he scrambled away from George, pulling himself desperately to his feet and stumbling backwards, staring with wide, disbelieving eyes at – at *George*, George, who – who just –

George pushed himself up by his hands. He was still bleeding, his face going pale, and he struggled to speak.

“D- Dream,” George said hoarsely, reaching out a hand, which made Dream flinch. “I’m – I –,”

He faltered, and then his eyes rolled into the back of his head and he folded over, unconscious.

And Dream was left standing there, alone, panting for breath, his world crashing down around him.

There were more sounds coming from the forest, and he jerked his head up. Mercian soldiers – there would be more – they would be looking for him.

It was all too much, too much for him to process. But he knew that they were still in danger, and he knew that George was hurt, and he knew –

Well. Those felt like the only things he knew right now.

He ran to George's side. George looked so fragile and small, curled around his wound, and Dream's head hurt with dissonance, because how, how could he reconcile this with what he had just seen, how - how could this be happening --?

He didn't have time to think about it. He picked George up again, and he stumbled back into the trees.

---

When George finally woke up, it was in a panicked burst, as though he had finally come up from underwater. He tore in a breath and shot to a sitting position, immediately feeling a sharp pain spike into his chest. He blinked through the haze of fever and pain, struggling to take in his surroundings.

He was leaning against a tree. He was in a forest. It was dark - evening, maybe? There wasn't any light.

He had a bandage around his chest. Who had put it there?

George heard someone clear his throat and jerked his head up. He realized that, a few feet away front of him, there was someone sitting on a fallen log, staring at him. His vision blurred, and then focused.

"Dream," he said, and for a second, he felt relieved.

But the longer he was able to focus on Dream, the clearer he was able to see him, the less relieved he felt.

Dream looked upset - he looked *angry*. His jaw was clenched, his shoulders were stiff, and he wasn't making eye contact with George. And he had Excalibur resting close to his right hand.

"Where are we?" George asked, his head spinning. "Wh... what happened?"

"We're still near Nemeth," Dream said. His voice was strange – sort of detached. "We've been running from the Mercian soldiers."

George's breath caught in his throat, and he remembered.

He remembered the battle. The *ambush*. He remembered defending himself with his sword and shield; he remembered knocking those men away with his magic, when they were about to strike Dream down. He remembered being struck down himself, the sword at his chest, and that Dream had saved him. He remembered – and here things got murky – but he remembered –

His blood ran ice cold in his veins.



George saw Dream's mouth twist into a kind of wry, resentful smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Are you realizing?" Dream asked bitterly, and George's heart sunk like a stone.

George just said, "Dream," in a sort of pleading way.

It made something dark flicker across Dream's face. "George," he said coldly. "Why don't you tell me what just happened back there?"

George's heart hammered in his chest. He struggled to sit up a little taller, feeling pain ratchet up and down his ribs. "I..." he exhaled, shaking his head. "It seems like you already know."

"Yeah," Dream said harshly. "I do. But I want to hear you say it."

Dream's gaze sent a chill down George's spine. It – it reminded him of how Dream looked every time he went on his rants about magic. Every time he talked about how much he hated sorcery.

It twisted a knife straight through George's chest that almost hurt worse than his physical wound.

"It was magic," he said in a whisper.

There was a long pause before Dream said, "you're a sorcerer."

"Yes." Even though his voice was soft, the admission ran clearly in the eerily silent forest; even the wind had seemed to die down to listen closely to their words.

Dream dug the toe of his boot into the dirt. His jaw worked angrily. "How long?"

George closed his eyes.

"*How long*, George?" Dream nearly shouted.

"I was born with magic," George answered, and he opened his eyes to see Dream's face fall in shock.

"This whole time?" he asked, going totally still. "You're... you're telling me you've been a sorcerer since -,"

It was like he couldn't process what he was hearing, and he stood suddenly, shaking his head and pacing away.

"I'm sorry," George said, feeling tears well up in his eyes.

"You're telling me," Dream shouted, turning on his heel, and now he was furious – "you're telling me you've been lying to me since the *second we met*? Since - since we were *kids*? This – this whole time, you've been lying to me." He laughed, a short, disbelieving sound, and grabbed his head.

"I wanted to tell you," George said, leaning forward desperately. This – this was the worst possible way for this to happen.

"And why didn't you?" Dream snapped.

“I was afraid!” George cried. “Don’t you understand why I’d be afraid?”

Dream stopped for a second, but then he shook his head. “What, George? You were afraid of *me*? You thought I was going to put you to death? Put you up on a pyre? Is that what you thought?”

“No – I - I don't know,” George stammered

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” Dream hissed, taking a step towards him. “Why didn’t you tell me a year ago? Why didn’t you tell me *five* years ago? Why -,” and here he stumbled, his voice breaking – “why didn’t you tell me *yesterday*, George?”

It was awful, awful – it felt like something was clawing into George’s chest, ripping it to shreds. “I don’t know,” he whispered, and Dream shook his head, his face shuttering closed. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Dream -,”

“Stop *calling me that*,” he shouted, and George froze.

King Clay stood in front of him, seething, his fists clenched at his sides.

“You’ve been manipulating me,” Clay said, and panic seized George.

“No. D- Clay, no. I -,”

“You’ve been *lying* to me,” Clay shouted, his voice agonized. “What else would you call that? You – I trusted you with everything, I -,” he shuddered, taking a few steps back, turning away so that George couldn’t see his face. “God, I’m such an *idiot*. I’m such a *fucking* idiot. All this – all this bullshit about destiny, about purpose -,”

“I wasn’t lying about any of that,” George said desperately. “Clay, I swear to you, I – I hid my magic from you, but I lied about *nothing* else. You *do* have a great destiny, you *will* be a great king, and – and I *am* loyal to you, Clay, I swear.”

Clay’s shoulders went rigid as George spoke, and when he was done, he turned to look at him. George held his gaze, which was full of rage. “You’ve lied about nothing else, huh?” he asked, and George grit his teeth. “Fine. Did you know about the Mercian invasions before I did?”

George’s blood ran cold, and his split second of hesitation was enough for Clay’s eyes to go wide.

“You did,” he hissed.

“I -,”

“You *knew*. You’re -” Then Clay froze. “Have you been helping them?”

“No,” George said immediately. “No, Clay. Please, just listen to me.”

“Why should I? So you can lie to me again – so you can -,”

“Clay,” George shouted, cutting him off. “If you thought I wanted to kill you, wouldn’t I have had a million opportunities to do it? If I wanted to hurt you, wouldn’t I have done it by now?”

Clay stopped short. But his face didn't lose its stormy expression.

“I’ve been *helping* you this whole time. I’ve been protecting you,” George said. “Like –

like today. With the rockslide, the – those soldiers, I threw against the cliff. That's – that's what I've been doing this whole time."

Clay's jaw worked as he glared at George for a long moment.

"Why?" the king asked coldly, and George felt his heart plummet. "What is it you *want* from me, George? This whole time - pretending to be my friend, pretending to be this - this helpless servant, when you have more power than any of us. What's your goal here? Seriously. Enlighten me."

George's breath caught in his chest for a moment. He couldn't do anything but stare at Clay, distraught at how – at how everything had just come shattering down in a matter of hours.

"I don't want anything from you," he breathed, and Clay's eyes flashed. "I – Clay, it's – it's *me*, it's still *me*. I wasn't pretending – I *am* your friend, and I *do* care about you, I..." he swallowed. "I I-"

"*Stop*," Clay snapped, and George did.

Clay stood there for a while longer, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides, like he was trying to decide something. Then he turned around and started to march into the forest.

"Wait -," George cried, but Clay held up a hand.

"I'm not leaving," he said shortly. "Just.... stay here."

It wasn't like George could do much else as he watched him stalk into the trees and disappear. He folded over himself slowly, burying his face in his hands. But he couldn't even cry. He just sat there in the awful silence, his mind seized with the thought that he had ruined everything.

---

Clay came back with kindling for a fire and a handful of herbs. He dropped the herbs at George's feet. George reached for them – rosemary leaves and chamomile flowers. Medicinal herbs. It surprised him.

"Thank you," George said slowly, and Clay nodded shortly, not meeting his gaze.

Carefully, George unwrapped his bandages, inspecting his wound and sucking in a breath. The gash along his chest was angry and red, but although it hurt like hell and made him dizzy to even look at, it wouldn't be fatal. Especially with these herbs. George put them in his lap and crushed them into a paste as he best he could before applying them to the wound and wrapping himself up with the new bandages Clay had left for him.

He saw Clay watching him out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked up, the king looked away. He was crouched in front of his kindling, looking annoyed.

"I just realized we can't light a fire," Clay said. "The Mercians are still looking for us. The smoke will draw them here."

George swallowed before saying, "I could help with that."

Clay shot him a sharp glance. "...how?"

George leaned forward and focused on the small bundle of twigs Clay had gathered, taking as deep of a breath as he could manage. He reached out a hand and lit a small fire, and then he created a little pocket of air right above the flame that spun the smoke out and dissipated it before it could reach the tops of the trees. He was aware of Clay watching him with wide, astonished eyes, and pulled his hand back.

"I thought you needed to speak to cast spells," Clay said, his voice wary.

"Usually, you do," George said, wrapping his arms around himself. The fire provided some warmth, but he still felt cold, on a bone-deep level. "I'm, uh. Different. It's called - elemental. I can cast some spells without speaking."

Clay's mouth set in a thin line. He sat back, crossing his arms and staring into the fire.

"I thought I knew everything about you," he finally said, surprising George. "But now I'm realizing I don't know anything."

George took a shaky breath. "That's just not true, Clay. You still know me."

Clay shrugged.

After another long moment, he asked, "how many times have you used magic around me?"

George hesitated. "Too many times to count," he eventually said, and Clay looked up at him sharply.

"*What?* What were you doing?"

George leaned forward, because this was the key, this was *everything*. "Clay. I only ever used my magic to help you," he said, and he willed him to see – willed him to hear the truth in his words. "I've – I've been protecting you this whole time."

The king's face clouded. "Protecting me from what?"

At that, George couldn't help but laugh shortly. "You get into, like, five life-threatening events a month, what *haven't* I protected you from?"

Clay didn't laugh.

George bit the inside of his lip. He looked for the easiest example. "The bandits. At the lake."

Clay's eyebrows furrowed. "The bandits..." then they raised in recognition. "When we were thirteen."

"Yes," George said, his heart racing. "The wind, that knocked the arrow away? That was me."

Clay opened his mouth as if to speak, but no words came out.

"When you were fifteen," George rushed, "and you got sick, and no healer could help? You got better, but nobody understood why? My gran helped me brew a potion, it was in the soup she made you -,"

“She’s magic, too?” Clay asked sharply.

“Yes,” George admitted, his heart skipping a beat. “And – and the Tournament. That voice that warned you about the pillager –,”

“That *was* you,” Clay interrupted, his eyes going wide, and hope rose in George’s chest for a brief moment before the king’s face went guarded again. “George – I don’t get it. If this is true, why wouldn’t you have told me sooner?”

George hesitated and pulled his arms tighter around himself. “I was afraid,” he eventually mumbled. “I... I was afraid of your father, at first, and then... I was afraid you would hate me. I didn’t want you to send me away.”

Something strange flashed across Clay’s face. He didn’t respond – just leaned forward to stoke the fire a little bit.

“Clay,” George eventually asked. “Why...”

He stopped.

“What?”

“Why are you helping me?” George whispered. “I’m slowing you down. You could be nearly back to Camelot by now. And – and – you obviously don’t want me here.”

Clay bit the inside of his lip, his forehead furrowing. And George wondered if he even knew, himself.

“I’m not just going to leave you to die in the forest, George,” Clay said. His voice wavered. “You saved my life – I’m not denying that, either. I’ll bring you back to Camelot and... and I’ll figure out what to do from there.”

George’s heart sunk like lead. He nodded numbly and pressed his forehead into his knees. He felt so small in that moment, so small and stupid. This had all gone as horribly as it could possibly have gone.

“Just rest, for now,” he heard Clay say. “We have a long walk tomorrow.”

George nodded and shifted so that he was laying down, his back to Clay. He wrapped his arms around himself. The silence was awful, and he could feel the space between him and Clay like a physical pressure at his back, and even though it made him feel even more pathetic than he already did, he couldn’t help the tears that started to spill from his eyes as he bit his lip to keep himself quiet.

His fever-stricken dreams made him feel like he was on fire.

---

They moved slowly. *Very* slowly. George was using a stick to support himself as he walked, so that he didn’t have to lean on Clay. But he was still limping, and they were picking through the wild part of the forest, staying off the beaten paths for fear of running into Mercians.

Clay was silent the whole way, walking slightly ahead of George and choosing their route.

The physical exhaustion of the trek was a good distraction from the guilt and regret gnawing at the inside of George's chest. He just focused on putting one foot in front of the other.

Late in the afternoon, Clay held out a hand, stopping him.

“Do you hear that?” he murmured, tilting his head.

George listened. There were the sounds of birds, the trees rustling in the wind, and –

Hoofbeats.

“Horses,” he said, turning his head, and Clay’s face went pale.

“Come on,” he said, grabbing George’s arm. “We have to –,”

There was a crashing sound in front of them, and a Mercian soldier burst into view.

“*Here!*” George heard him shout, and he was galloping towards them, knocking back an arrow in his bow.

Clay drew Excalibur, but before the man was even in range, George pushed his hand forward. He threw the man from his horse with a single motion, and the horse came to a stop in front of them, whinnying. George grabbed his reins.

Clay stared at George in open astonishment for a single second before they heard more shouts, multiplying in the trees around them. George whirled and saw, in the distance, flashes of green and silver all around them. They were being circled – they were being surrounded.

“Clay,” he said frantically, and he pushed the horse’s reins into Clay’s hands. “You have to get out of here.”

Clay’s face was stricken. “What?”

“Get on this horse and go,” George hissed, “quickly! I’ll hold them off. You have to make it back to Camelot.”

Clay swung up into the saddle on instinct, but he looked conflicted. “George –,”

Whatever he was going to say, it didn’t matter, because all of a sudden George was being pulled back by some invisible force. He whirled and saw a sorcerer in green robes emerge from the trees, her arm extended, her mouth moving with words he couldn’t hear – and he managed to yank his own hand forward to counter her magic, throwing her back. There were three more soldiers within view, suddenly, and George desperately thrust his hands out, sending a wave of magic that threw them off their horses. The action sent a wave of exhaustion through his body, sending him stumbling forward, as more Mercians appeared. And there were too many of them - and there wasn't time.

He turned and saw Clay, watching him with a stricken, pale expression, and he cried, “*Go, Dream! Run!*”

Another wave of magic pulled him back, and this one was stronger, sending him stumbling to his knees - he tried to bring his hands up but they were suddenly pinned to his side, and he saw two sorcerers stalking towards him at once, a third coming through the trees and slamming him to the ground, the impact sending sharp pain through his ribs. And there were more, soldiers bursting forward, their swords held at the ready, all of them shouting -

George twisted his head just in time to see Clay disappearing into the trees.

All the breath left his chest at once, his head clearing. Whether it was in relief or despair, he couldn't tell.

"It's the sorcerer!" he heard someone say, and someone else shouted – "remember what Minx said!"

Something smashed into the side of his head, and George fell easily into darkness.

#### Chapter End Notes

:D

Y'all have no idea how much time I've spent thinking about this chapter AAAAA

I hope it lived up to your expectations, and.... I'll see you next week!

## twenty, pt. 2

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There was shouting in the town square. A war party, coming through on their way back to the castle. But this one seemed different from the others.

Tommy and Tubbo paused on the side of the street, watching the Mercian soldiers and sorcerers walk by, waving triumphantly at the citizens of Wilbur's city.

"What's going on?" Tommy asked a passing soldier.

The man grinned broadly. "We sent the King of Camelot packing," he said, "and we've captured his sorcerer!"

Tommy's eyes widened, and he pushed forward through the crowd a little, even as Tubbo protested from behind him. He needed to see, needed to know if it was really –

He broke through the front of the crowd and, in the middle of the war party, he saw two soldiers carrying an unconscious man between them, his feet dragging in the dirt. The man was passed out cold, his head lolling to the side, and he was bleeding, badly, from a wound across his chest. He looked like shit, knocked out and beat-up and *familiar*, and Tommy clenched his jaw.

"George," he muttered.

"Tommy," he heard Tubbo say, grabbing his hand from behind. "Tommy, we've got to go."

Tommy took one last look at George, who looked so *small* and fragile, and then he nodded, turning around and following Tubbo back through the crowd and towards the castle. As they went, he explained to Tubbo, in a low, hushed voice, what he had seen, and what it meant.

He needed to talk to Wilbur.

---

Clay had never been more purely relieved to see Sapnap than he was when he entered the Great Hall to see him battered, but alive, and he suspected the feeling was mutual.

"*Clay*," Sapnap shouted, running towards him and practically tackling him in a hug. Bad wasn't too far behind. Clay looked disheveled compared to them, having limped directly into the Hall still wearing his dirty, dented battle armor, while they were in their usual day clothes. They were the only two people around; Clay wondered if they had been talking, strategizing about what to do if he hadn't returned.



The happy reunion didn't last long. As Clay was embracing Bad, he saw Sapnap's face fall, the knight searching for someone who wasn't behind him.

"Clay," Sapnap said urgently as Clay and Bad broke apart. "Where's George?"

Clay hesitated.

Bad's hand flew over his mouth. "Oh, God – is he... is he gone?" he asked, his eyes suddenly welling up with tears.

Once again, the scene replayed in Clay's mind. The last he had seen of George, he was being swarmed with Mercians, but they weren't trying to kill him. They had forced him to the ground – restrained him.

(George had told him to run. He had told him to run, so that's what Clay did. He couldn't be blamed for that. He couldn't be blamed for the way they had bashed the handle of a sword into his head, even when he was already pinned to the ground --)

"He's alive," he made himself say, and Sapnap exhaled shakily as Bad's shoulders slumped. "But he's been captured by the Mercians."

Bad furrowed his brow. "Captured?" he echoed. "Why would the Mercians want to kidnap George?"

"Who cares?" Sapnap said impatiently, suddenly set on edge. "All that's important is getting him back. If we leave tonight, we could be in Mercia tomorrow. Or we could send a message to their castle-,"

"Stop," Clay said, holding up a hand. His stomach lurched to think about what he had to tell them. "There's... there's something you need to know about George."

He pushed past his friends and walked towards the table in the middle of the hall, placing his helmet down with a solid thud on the surface of the oak, and then pacing around to the other side, his thoughts swirling. Once he was standing opposite Sapnap and Bad, he stopped, looking up directly into their confused expressions.

"George is a sorcerer," he said.

There was a moment of shocked, frozen silence before Bad took a small step back, putting an agitated hand on the side of his head. "What?" he asked. "How... how do you know?"

"I saw it with my own eyes," Clay said, feeling that familiar heatwave of betrayal rise up in his chest. "He's been lying to us for as long as we've known him. Since we were kids."

Sapnap just looked stoic. He was staring at Clay with a strange expression.

"Why would he hide that from us?" Bad asked, sounding genuinely hurt.

Clay lifted his shoulders once. "Good question."

Sapnap sighed and crossed his arms.

"Well," Bad said, still sounding put-off. He took his glasses off and put them back on. Then he said, "well. Okay. So... do you think he'll be able to get away by himself, then?"

"No way," Sapnap said, as Clay looked at Bad with a furrowed brow. "One magic user

against, like, a million? He doesn't stand a chance. We still need to go back for him."

Bad nodded firmly. "Right. Well, let's think this through. Where are the places they could be holding him? My first instinct is the castle -,"

"I don't think you guys are getting it," Clay interrupted, his voice coming out harsh. He fought to keep control of himself as he spoke. "We're not *going back* for George. George is a traitor. He *betrayed* us."

His friends stared at him in stunned silence, but he elaborated no further, dropping his gaze to the table.

"Clay," Sapnap eventually said, and the patronizing tone of his voice immediately pissed Clay off. "You can't be serious."

"I'm completely serious."

"George is still our friend," Bad said. "We can't just -,"

"George lied to us," Clay snapped, his shoulders tensing. "What aren't you getting about this? He was manipulating us."

"Come on, man," Sapnap said angrily. "You think George has an inch of malice towards us in his entire body?"

"I don't know," Clay said, spreading out his arms. "Apparently, I don't know anything about him."

"Clay," Bad said in exasperation, as though *Clay* were the crazy one.

"Why wouldn't he have told me?" Clay exploded, his voice ringing in the Hall. "If he had good intentions, why wouldn't he have just told me? We told each other *everything*."

"Are you kidding me?" Sapnap said, his voice rising to match Clay's. "Clay, do you *remember* what you were like as a kid? Every third sentence, you talked about how much you hated magic."

"Remember when you used to call yourself the killer of sorcerers?" Bad asked uncomfortably.

"Remember when your dad literally executed *hundreds* of people for using magic?" Sapnap said. "Like – dude. Of course George wouldn't want to tell us! He probably thought we'd turn him over to Daniel. He could have been killed."

Clay's face stung as though he had been slapped. He – he knew he hadn't been very tolerant of magic, but - "I would have *never* hurt George," he insisted. "He must have known that."

"Maybe he didn't," Bad said softly.

Clay's mind was spinning, his thoughts short-circuiting, unable to understand why his friends were treating him like *he* was in the wrong. Like *he* was the bad guy. Sapnap and Bad had this all wrong, he *knew* that on a gut level, but his mind wasn't working right, wasn't giving him the words to defend the storm of anger and betrayal and hurt that was raging in his chest.

"You can't just abandon him like this," Sapnap said, his tone measured but clearly angry.

“He’s been *helping* you this whole time. He saved your life.”

But there was something off about those words, something that made Clay look sharply at Sapnap. “How do you know that?” he said.

Sapnap’s eyes widened slightly, and then his gaze slid towards the floor, and in the second of hesitation where he opened his mouth without saying anything, something clicked in Clay’s head.

“Did you know?” he asked quietly.

Sapnap swallowed before making eye contact. “I – I did. Only for the past few days,” he followed quickly, but Clay was already pushing away from the table.

“Get out,” he said, turning his back.

“Clay, I saw him *heal you*. Technoblade killed you, and George saved your life,” Sapnap argued behind him. “I’m not gonna let you -,”

“I said *get out!*” Clay exploded, whirling, seeing Sapnap’s eyes widen as Bad shrunk back from the intensity of his outburst. “Both of you, leave.”

“Clay -,”

“I am ordering you to get out of this room,” the king shouted, his voice echoing.

Sapnap and Bad hesitated for a long moment, glancing at each other and their friend.

But they were subjects to King Clay, first and finally, and when Clay held his ground, Bad bowed his head shallowly and turned to leave, pulling Sapnap behind him. Sapnap’s stare lingered on Clay for one second longer before he followed Bad out of the Hall.

As the door closed behind them, Clay sat down heavily in his throne. The silence in the room rang in his ears. He took a deep breath, but none of the tension left his body. He felt wound-up, ready to explode.

They didn’t understand. They didn’t understand, because it was different for them. George was their friend, but he was more, so much more for Clay, and – and it made everything worse, made him think back on their every interaction with a sense of deep humiliation. He had trusted George with everything, and George *knew* that, and the whole time, he had been tricking him, going behind his back. George must have thought Clay was either stupid or evil, and the thought of either ached like a blow to his chest that didn’t fade. The fact that Sapnap knew – that George had apparently trusted him more than Clay – was salt in the wound.

He had thought George cared about him. Was that still possible?

(A memory came to him unprovoked, playing in his mind as crystal clear as if he were living it again. George, standing in their secret clearing on the castle grounds, his face conflicted, saying, “I’m loyal to you, *always* -,”)

(And another – of George standing in front of him in his room, his eyes dark and devoted, his hands in Clay’s, saying, “everything I do, I do for you,” and the way Clay could tell that – *he was telling the truth.*)

Clay dropped his head into his hands, trying to ignore the way they trembled.

And then...

And then another thought came to him, slowly - a thought that made him sit up straight in his throne, staring off into space for a moment.

He stood up and left the Great Hall; he discarded his armor and found a change of clothes in his quarters; and then he headed for the woods.

---

When George woke up, he thought, for one disoriented moment, that he was in the dungeons of Camelot; and the thought occurred to him, with a sick, low wrench in his stomach, that Clay might be putting him to death.

But the thought dissipated as his faculties returned. The room was not like the stone-walled dungeons of Camelot. Rather, he was in a sort of small, dark cave, lit only by a single flickering torch on the far wall. Iron bars trapped him in a sort of cell in the far corner, and there were shackles cutting into his wrists, chaining him to the walls. On the far wall was a heavy door, seemingly built into the rock wall.

He was in Mercia, he remembered; remembered Dream turning away from him and leaving him to the soldiers, like he had asked him to. Like he had foolishly hoped he wouldn't.

George pushed himself to a sitting position on the stone floor. Overall, he was in a pretty terrible state. His bandages had stayed wrapped around his chest, but the wound still hurt like hell; he felt weak all over, hungry and probably dehydrated, shivering in the cold, damp air of whatever dungeon he was in.

Fighting down panic, George screwed his eyes shut and asked his magic to break the chains

—

And then he jerked away, shouting in surprise, as the shackles suddenly burned into his wrists, the iron red-hot. He felt his magic smash into some kind of wall, fizzling out, and he was left gasping, pain shooting up and down his forearms.

The chains didn't budge.

What. The fuck.

He looked closer at the shackles and saw that there were Old Language letters carved into the iron, a faint glow fading away along with the heat. Experimentally, George tried to summon a flame in his hands – but as he did, the enchantments lit up again, making him grit his teeth against the wave of heat flowing down his arms and stopping his magic.

It was painful, and it felt *wrong*, so wrong, to reach for the magic that was always lingering just under the surface and to have it denied. Without his magic, George felt exposed and weak and *alone* as he curled into himself, staring at the enchantments and trying to think of some way, *any way*, to get his magic back.

The heavy door to the dungeon opened suddenly, and George looked up to see a tall, unfamiliar man in Mercian garb walking through, followed by a familiar face that made him sit up straight, his heart pounding. The man stood back against the wall, and Minx approached George's

cell.

“Nice to see you again, Georgie,” she said. Minx looked exactly as George remembered her – the long silver hair, the strange pale eyes, the unmistakable feeling that she was staring into the very center of him. The flickering torchlight illuminated her face, giving it a sort of wild look.

George didn’t respond, feeling his vulnerability in front of her as sharply as he felt the stone wall digging into his back.

“Sorry for all the precautions,” she said, nodding towards the shackles on his wrists. “It’s just, you know. We don’t have that great of a track record, you and me.” She fell into a cross-legged position on the ground right outside of the cell, so that she was on an even level with George. A small smile played on her lips.

“What do you want?” George finally asked. “Why am I here?”

Minx raised her eyebrows. “I want what I’ve always wanted,” she said. “I want you to join me.”

George scoffed despite himself. “And taking me prisoner is your attempt at recruitment?”

“I don’t want you to think of yourself as a prisoner,” she said, propping her chin up on her hand. “I want you to think of this as... temporary. I’m on your side, George, and you’re on mine. The sooner you figure that out, the better for both of us.”

“I’m not on your side,” George denied.

“And why not?”

“You’re taking over by force, and I’ve heard the rumors. I remember what you told me. You’re wiping out non-magic users.”

“Only the ones who deserve it,” Minx said, her eyes lighting up with that ghostly white light for a moment before fading away. A slow grin crossed her face. “And you can’t deny a few of them *do*.”

George’s stomach churned. He pushed himself as far away from her as his chains would allow.

“Listen to me, George,” Minx said. “Once we’ve taken over the Five Kingdoms, magic will be reign over Albion. We’ll be able to live freely, openly. I know you don’t agree with everything we’re doing, but what other option do you *have*?”

“I’m loyal to King Clay,” George responded automatically.

Minx’s expression darkened. “Still?”

“Always,” he said, feeling the weight of the word.

She shook her head, pursing her lips. “I keep waiting for you to get a little self-respect, George. But I’m starting to feel like that might never happen. You just keep trailing behind this royal pain in the ass like a lost little puppy dog. For a person of your ability, it’s embarrassing.”

George held her gaze, unimpressed.

“And now he’s left you here to die, and you *still* won’t go against him.”

It was the first sentence that stung. His shoulders stiffened, and he looked away.

“Whatever you think you have with him – if it’s loyalty or friendship or love – this isn’t that,” Minx mused, tilting her head to try and catch George’s gaze. “They told me what happened. You gave yourself up to protect him. If he cared about you, don’t you think he’d come back for you?”

“He -,”

The words died in George’s throat.

He wanted to say, *he will*.

But in that moment, he wasn’t certain. And that thought made him feel even smaller and more alone than he already did.

Minx sighed. “Moment of truth, George. Your *Dream* isn’t all he’s cracked up to be. He’s not coming to get you, and he’s not going to restore magic to Albion. He never was. But the Circle can. And we want you to join us. Think it over.”

As she stood to leave, he leaned forward, suddenly desperate. “Wait – Minx.”

“Yes?”

“I’m – I haven’t eaten for days,” George said, and suddenly felt that reality as a sharp pang in his stomach, a sort of numb, persistent ache in his body. “I need food – water.”

Minx hesitated, then turned to the man standing guard. She said, “some water, but no food.”

She turned back to George, who felt himself shrinking, and said coolly, “sorry, Georgie, but I have no interest in keeping you as a pet. You can either decide to join us, or you can rot in here. The choice is yours.”

She muffled the torch on the wall with a flick of her wrist; the door closed behind her; and George was left in a cold, silent darkness that wrapped him up and swallowed him whole.

---

George’s grandmother’s house looked exactly like Clay remembered it. A light flickered in the window of the little cabin, overgrown with vines and plants; the spring garden was newly planted but already showing signs of growth. He had visited this house often as a child, though it had been a while since he made the trip.

He paused outside of the cabin for a long moment, his heart hammering in his chest, before knocking on the door.

It opened nearly immediately. Sylvia stood there, looking... strange. Sad, maybe.

“Your Highness,” she said, bowing her head a little.

“Hi, Sylvia,” Clay said tiredly. “Just Clay, please.”

Sylvia motioned him inside, where he stood for a moment, unsure of himself. Unsure of

what, exactly, he was doing here.

“Clay,” Sylvia said, and when he looked up at her, he realized that it wasn’t sadness, but rather fear, that was etched into her face. “Has something happened to George?”

Clay realized with a surge what she must have thought of his appearance. “No,” he said quickly, then after a moment of consideration, “well, yes, but he’s alive. He’s – he’s been captured by the Mercians.”

Sylvia took a shaky breath, bracing herself on the back of one of the chairs at her small kitchen table. “George is... resourceful,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll be alright.”

“He’s magic,” Clay said abruptly. There was no better way to say it. “And so are you.”

For a moment, the light from the flickering candle on the table illuminated Sylvia’s face sharply as she stared at Clay, and he realized that he was talking to a witch. He wondered if he should be afraid.

But Sylvia just said, “he told you.”

Clay’s expression darkened. “I found out.”

Sylvia nodded, scanning his face. “And now you’re here. Why?”

Why? The question sat heavily in the air. Clay wasn’t sure how to answer.

Sylvia seemed to notice that he was lost for words, and she prompted him. “Are you angry with George?”

“Of course I am,” he said, feeling that swirl of emotions start up in his chest again. “He lied to me.”

“He did,” Sylvia said simply. “He didn’t want to.”

“Then why didn’t he tell me?” Clay asked, clenching his fists. It’s the question he can’t get over. “I wouldn’t have hurt him. That... that can’t be what he thought.”

Sylvia’s eyes were serious and her voice was soft as she said, “No. I was never certain, but George trusted you. Mostly? Mostly, he was afraid that you would hate him.”

The words stabbed.

“He knew what you thought of magic,” Sylvia continued. “And he knew Daniel. He didn’t want to be the person who pitted you against your father. And he was afraid of how you would react when you found out that he had hidden his magic for so long.”

And that - that made sense. It made sense in a way that scared Clay. Because it implied that George’s silence was *his* fault. *His* fault, for hating magic.

“This isn’t fair,” he protested, his defensive instincts kicking in, pacing in the small space of the cabin. Sylvia sat down in her kitchen chair, watching him. “I – I have reason to hate magic. Both of my parents were murdered by sorcerers!” he nearly shouted, spinning towards Sylvia, who didn’t flinch. “Magic destroyed my family, magic is attacking my kingdom. How can I be expected to – to just accept it, just for George? How could I *not* feel betrayed? How could I not be furious?”

“Do you know what happened to George’s parents?” Sylvia cut him off, her words

suddenly sharp.

Clay pulled up short. "I..."

They had talked about it before.

"They died in the war," he said, "the war against the sorcerers -," but then he stopped, his eyes going wide.

Sylvia stood and came towards him. And the pain he saw in her eyes was – was almost too much to bear.

"Your father killed both of George's parents," Sylvia said, and Clay's stomach dropped like a stone. "They did harm to no one, and they were both put on the pyre."

Clay took a step back, feeling the world spin around him. "That... that can't be true."

"Why not?" Sylvia asked firmly.

"Because... George never – he never said anything," Clay said, his heart hammering in his chest. "How could he..."

How could he have lived in that castle, serving his parents' murderer? How could he have defended the crown, knowing what Daniel had done? How could he have hidden that from Clay, when Clay spent most of his life talking about his father like he could do no wrong? How –

"Because he cared about you," Sylvia said, answering every question in one fell swoop. Clay looked at her with wide, startled eyes, his hands starting to shake. "Clay. I want you to listen to me. You and George – your destinies are intertwined."

"He told me," Clay mumbled. "He told me about Albion."

"It's more than that," Sylvia said, her head tilting forward. "You are destined to restore magic to this land, Clay. You and George. *Together*. That's the only way this works."

"How?" Clay asked, his voice coming out thick with emotion. "Wh- why? Why us?"

She reached out and grabbed his hands, her grip steady where he trembled. As she looked at him, Clay was reminded acutely of George – her face a picture of conviction. "You and George hold parallel hurt," she said softly. "Magic harmed you. It did. And your family harmed George. If you choose to play by the rules that are as old as Albion, then you're right. You two have the right to feel angry, and bitter, and resentful towards each other. And if you give into that, you'll become a part of an endless cycle, Clay. An endless cycle of revenge and retribution for the sins of the past.

"But *you* – you, Clay, and George – you've been given the chance to choose. You can choose to end the cycle. You can choose your care for each other over the anger you feel. You can choose your destiny over your hurt, Clay. I watched George make his choice many years ago. And he chose you."

Sylvia's words struck some chord deep inside of Clay that seemed to reverberate throughout his entire body, ringing in his head. It struck so true that he pulled away, overwhelmed by the torrent of thoughts and emotions her words unleashed.

"I need some time to think," he said shortly, and he moved past her, heading for the door.



“King Clay,” Sylvia said, and he stopped, his hands curling on the doorframe.

When he turned around, Sylvia’s eyes shone with tears.

“Please,” she said. “Please, bring him home.”

Clay stared at her for a long moment before he left.

Night fell. Clay stumbled over the uneven ground as he walked through the forest, heading back towards the castle. He was exhausted, pushed to his limit, barely aware of his surroundings. Barely capable of processing the thoughts that were crowding his mind. The things Sylvia had said.

The doors to his quarters shut with a solid thud, and Clay was left staring down a dark, cold room. Empty. Old ashes in the hearth. An unmade bed.

He drifted slowly towards his bed, kicking his boots off, shedding his outer layers. He sat on the end of the bed and stared off into space.

He remembered the last time he slept here. He remembered –

It hurt too much. Like a knife in his chest that wouldn’t stop twisting.

With nobody there to distract him, and sleep the furthest thing from his mind, there was nothing left for Clay to do but think.

So he thought. He thought about every time he had derided magic. Talked about sorcerers as though they were vermin – less than human. He remembered the games they played as children; he remembered being the *killer of sorcerers*. He remembered his father’s mantras, drilled into him through years of repetition. He remembered that look in George’s eyes. The look he had always attributed to George’s sensitivity towards magic, but that he now realized was - was *fear*. And hurt.

And suddenly, his entire perception of George flipped on its head.

How did George stand it?

How had he stayed by Clay’s side, believing that Clay would have hated him if he knew the truth?

It seemed, to him, to be an impossibility. It just didn’t make sense. He couldn’t fathom – couldn’t imagine what it must have taken for George to exist in the same space as Daniel. To *stand up to him* –

Clay was shaking again, he realized as he brought his hands up, and because he was alone, he finally let the tears that had been building up for the past several days start to flow. He wept into his hands, curled over himself and overwhelmed with what he was finally starting to understand.

It *was* his fault that George had stayed silent. It was Clay’s fault, for hating magic so viciously that George had believed Clay didn’t love him more.

George, who had stayed at his side. Throughout everything. Who had comforted him, challenged him, cared for him. Who had helped him. Protected him. Never asking for credit. Never

looking for power. Just – just doing it because Clay was his friend. Because –

Clay didn't deserve it. He didn't deserve him. He had spent this whole time angry at George, in some part, because of his parents - because of what magic had done to his family. But now he knew that George had harbored the same pain, and he had chosen Clay, anyway.

And Clay had left him there, with the Mercians, and now George was gone.

He had fucked up. *Badly*.

But with this thought, something finally shifted in Clay. Something finally clicked into place. He scrubbed at his face, feeling his tears slow, and he straightened up in his bed.

A wave of conviction spread through him.

He would fix this. He had to, and he could. He was the King of Camelot. He was Clay – he was *Dream* – and - and this was *George*.

He would find George and bring him back. There was nothing that could stand in his way, now. He owed George that much, at least. He wouldn't abandon him. He would make things right.

But for now, the days of battle and travel and sleep deprivation hit him all at once. He fell back onto his bed and fell asleep almost immediately.

He dreamed of his mother, once again.

And at the end, he saw her coming close. He heard her voice, like bells. That final sentence he could never make out was clear for the first time – clearer than it had ever been before.

*Dreams are a form of magic*, she had told him once, a lifetime ago.

These words weren't a memory. They were a message.

His mother leaned close to his ear, and she told him, "*you can trust him.*"

---

The fever setting into George's skin kept him from sleeping for longer than a few minutes at a time. The floor of the cave was hard and uncomfortable, his chains preventing him from getting into a comfortable position. He was shivering with cold, yet his skin felt hot and sweaty, and when he pressed a hand gingerly to his chest, he could feel how sensitive the wound felt. Probably infected.

With no small amount of irony, he wondered if his little golden surge of healing magic was something he could use for himself, or if that was a Dream-specific phenomenon.

It didn't seem to matter. No matter how many times he tried, he couldn't break past the enchantments on his shackles. Each try left him in an even worse state than the last one, shaking with aftershocks as the chains sent bolts of lightning of pain up his arms. His magic was firmly

locked away.

George had never felt more powerless, and he had never felt more alone.

He had no real way of knowing the time, but he assumed it was the next morning when the door opened again and Minx re-appeared, dressed in a dark purple dress that was different from the previous day. This time, she opened up the door to his cell, walking inside and setting down a small glass of water that George scrambled to drink. The water barely alleviated the sandpaper-rough feeling in this throat.

Minx sat down inside the cell, just across from George. Her gaze tracked to his shackles, where burn marks had formed in rings around his wrists. “Any luck with that?” she asked, amused.

He glared at her.

She shrugged. “I don’t blame you for trying. If anyone could get out of those things, it would probably be you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” George muttered, his voice hoarse.

Minx stopped for a second, evaluating him. “George,” she said, leaning forward. “Do you have any idea how actually powerful you are?”

His brow furrowed.

“Have you read the prophecies about your little prince?” Minx asked.

“Of course I have,” he said.

“Then you know you’re a part of them.”

“Yes.” He had read those sections, naturally. The ‘powerful sorcerer’ who would help Dream take the crown. That was meant to be him.

But the way Minx looked at him made him think she was talking about something else.

“Do you have any idea that that crazy golden light is that swallows you up every now and then?” Minx asked, her eyes manic and bright.

George stayed quiet. The answer was no, but he wasn’t sure he wanted Minx to know that. He had scoured the books in Camelot’s library, all of his grandmother’s volumes, and he had found nothing. He still had no idea.

Minx grinned. “Maybe the libraries in Mercia are a little more complete,” she said, guessing his thoughts. She inched closer to him. George tried to push himself away, but was stopped by his chains.

“You don’t just have magic, George,” Minx breathed. “You *are* magic.”

George stared at her, uncomprehending.

“The energy we all tap into to use magic? The energy that elementals have a stronger connection to? It’s *embodied* in you, George, it’s *personified*,” Minx started rambling. George wondered how long she had known this, how long she had thought about this conversation. “It’s stronger in you than in anyone I’ve ever seen before. For most people, magic is a tool, but for you, it’s like – it’s like a person, isn’t it? It’s like a *voice*.”

George hesitated, thinking about the strange double voice he heard when he was swept up in the golden light; thinking about the conversations he would have with his magic, asking it to move, to act in the ways he needed it to act - and the way it would speak back. He thought about how lonely he felt now, without that connection - not so much a severed limb as a lost companion.

“George,” Minx said in a hiss, leaning forward, her hands clenching at the fabric of her dress. “Your potential is basically unlimited. Join us. We would use your gift. You would be powerful – celebrated.”

George hesitated for a moment, and he considered his options. He would never join Minx, not really. But if he could convince her to let him out of these chains – if he could reach his magic – maybe he would have a chance at escape.

“Okay,” he said, and saw Minx’s eyes grow wider. “Okay. I – I want to know more about this. Will you help me?”

“Yes,” she said, suddenly cool.

“Then – then let me out, and I’ll join you,” George said, holding out his wrists.

She peered at him for a long moment. “Do you know you’re a terrible liar, George?”

“I’m not lying,” he insisted.

“I’ll let you out,” Minx said, “but not until you prove you’ve had a change of heart.”

His heart skipped a beat. “What do you want me to do?”

Minx sat back against the bars of his cell, crossing her arms. “Clay’s been a bit harder to get rid of than we initially hoped,” she said, and George’s stomach sank. “Well, I suppose you know him better than anyone, hm? So tell me everything. Tell me where he goes, what he does every day. Tell me – if *you* were going to kill him, where would *you* do it?”

George let out a breath. His foggy, fever-hazed brain scrambled for the right response. If he could lie – if he could say something convincing enough – but his brain wasn’t working right, wasn’t finding anything but the truth. And that – that he *couldn’t* tell her. Couldn’t give her anything that might actually be used against Dream.

“That’s what I thought,” Minx said, her mouth set in a straight line. “Nice try, though.”

George dropped his head with a shaky sigh.

Minx looked irritated now. “This is pathetic, George. Really. Why can’t you see that your attachment to Clay is holding you back? You could be the most powerful person in the world.”

“You’re the one who wants power here, Minx,” George mumbled. “Not me.”

“What is it you *do* want, George?”

And George thought of waking up in Dream’s arms, the sun slanting through the windows, reaching up to touch his face, unafraid –

He was brought back to reality when Minx sighed in frustration, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “You’re being stupid, George,” she said in a lilt. “I’m giving you an out here, and you’re refusing to take it.”

“I’d rather take my chances with Clay than join another Daniel,” George said coldly.

And now she was actually angry.

She stood and took a few steps towards George, bringing a hand up, and George felt a surge of magic push him up against the wall, lifting him up to almost a standing position. The force against his chest sent a sharp stabbing pain through his ribs, and he gasped for air as Minx towered over him.

“Special or not, you’re powerless now,” Minx said in a sort of snarl. She traced a finger along his chin, her nail scraping against his skin. “Maybe you should remember that.”

George glared at her and tried, once more, to push past the enchantments on his chains, trying to surge forward, to push her away from him – but his magic sputtered out at his wrists as the shackles burned into his skin, and he shouted out at the sharp pain that laced up his arms, all the way up to his shoulders.

Minx smirked and released her hold on him, letting him fall to the ground.

“Soon you’re going to realize that you don’t really have a choice, George,” Minx said, sending a bolt of dread through George’s chest. “You can either join us and choose to use your gift, or you can waste away here. Nobody is coming to help you.”

And she left him in a haze of fever and pain, clinging desperately to a hope that was starting to slip through his fingers.

---

Dream woke to the sound of persistent knocking at his door. He sat up from where he had passed out the night before, still fully dressed, and blinked at the door, the early morning sun streaming through his windows.

It was Sapnap, wearing his armor and drawing himself up when Dream opened the door. His face was nervous, but resolute.

“Listen,” Sapnap said, and started in on a rush of words before Dream could get a word in edgewise. “I’m going to get George. I know you’re pissed off at him, and I don’t care if you don’t come with me. But I can’t just leave him out there. And if I have to go against your orders to do it, then I will. I don’t want to, but you’re being -,”

“Sapnap,” Dream interrupted, seeing the knight wince. “You’re right. And I’m coming with you.”

Sapnap’s eyes widened, and he stared at Dream for a long moment, his mouth hanging slightly open.

“That’s a development,” is what he came up with, his shoulders relaxing in a relieved sigh.

“I had a long night,” Dream said wryly.

Before he could explain any further, he saw Bad rushing up the hallway towards them.

“Sapnap – Clay -,” he said, breathing hard. “You guys need to see this.”

It was a person, a man – a boy? A tall child, standing in the Great Hall.

He was familiar. Why did he look familiar?

Dream couldn't place it until the stranger saw him and his face lit up in an enormous, toothy grin. He rushed forward to grab Dream's hand, the forwardness of his action both surprising and disarming.

"King Clay!" he said in a sort of roar, "what an honor to see you again! It's been too long, hasn't it, my friend?"

"Have we met?" Dream asked, amused despite himself.

"My name's Tommy, we met at the Tournament a few years back, if you remember," he said. "I've come here from Mercia."

Dream's good humor evaporated. He took a step back as Sarnap drew his sword. Tommy threw up his hands.

"Please, gentlemen, please," he said, his voice sort of cracking. "Listen, I – I'm here to offer help!"

"Yeah, we've had a few offers like that recently," Dream said, his eyes narrowing.

He could actually see Tommy gulp. "Listen," he said again. "I'm here on behalf of Lord Wilbur. You remember him? Tall lad, good hair?"

Dream did remember him, actually. Remembered sparring against him at the Tournament. "I know Wilbur."

"Good, good. Look. Mercia's been taken over by this group of sorcerers called the Circle," Tommy said rapidly, his words tumbling over themselves. "Well, we're not huge fans, us. So we were thinking – perhaps we could be of some assistance to you. Y'know, subterfuge from the inside and whatnot. What do you think?"

Dream blinked at him for a moment, his brow furrowing. "You want to fight Mercia from the inside?"

"Basically, yes," Tommy said with a bright grin. "However you think is best."

Dream glanced at Sarnap, who looked seriously skeptical.

"Tommy," the king said. "You... seem to mean well. But I'm going to need some way to know that you're telling me the truth. We've had a few too many stabs in the back recently."

Tommy's eyes lit up and he nodded. "That's actually why I came here," he said. "The Mercians are keeping your servant, George, hostage. And I can tell you where they're keeping him."

Dream's attention was suddenly drawn razor-sharp, and he heard Bad gasp. "You can bring us to him?" Dream asked urgently, his heart picking up in his chest.

Tommy nodded. “Wilbur and I don’t think we should help with the rescuing part - at least, not if you want our help in the future – but I can get you there, and... y’know... let you do your thing,” he finished, miming the swing of a sword.

“What do you think, Clay?” Bad murmured, while Sapnap said, “listen, Tommy, we need some time to think about this,” but Dream had already made up his mind. His gut was telling him Tommy was telling the truth. And every other cell in his body was telling him to get to George, *fast*.

“Get me there,” he told Tommy, who immediately grinned. “Get me there, and if we really find George, then you’ll have earned our trust.”

Tommy’s head nodded so fast Dream thought it might disconnect from his neck. “Fantastic,” he said. “Are you ready to leave now?”

“Clay,” Bad said, and Dream felt a hand on his shoulder, pulling him around.

Bad looked at him with concern. “Not that I’m not happy about your change of heart,” he asked quietly, “but are you sure about this? You’ll be heading into the heart of Mercia. Camelot still needs you.”

His words gave Dream pause, but after a moment, he just nodded. “And Camelot will still have me,” he said firmly. “After we get George.”

“Hell yes,” Sapnap said, clapping him on the shoulder. “What do you say, Bad? You coming along for this one?”

Bad hesitated for a moment, but then his eyes steeled in a kind of resolve. “Oh – screw it,” he said, his face going red at the language. “Let’s do this.”

And for a moment, it was like old times, the three of them standing next to each other, united in purpose.

The moment was interrupted by Tommy, who inserted himself into their little circle, an oversized grin on his face. “Can’t tell you how excited I am that you’re on our side,” he said, bouncing slightly on the balls of his feet.

Clay gave him a skeptical look. “I think you mean, now that *you’re* on *our* side.”

“Well, that’s just semantics, innit?”

---

They travelled on a narrow, winding route that Tommy seemed to know by heart, staying successfully unseen as they went deeper and deeper into Mercian territory. By a few hours into the journey, Dream was convinced of Tommy’s trustworthiness, mostly because of the sheer amount of information spilling from Tommy’s mouth at every moment.

He said things like, “the Circle is a powerful group of sorcerers,” and “the leader is a woman named Minx.” He said, “they know about George’s magic – and they know about the prophecies about you, Clay. That one, uh, might have been a bit my fault. Sorry.” He said, “they’ve been keeping prisoners in a secret dungeon – a series of caverns hidden in the forest. I’ve been

there before, so I know where it is.”

Dream just listened quietly, letting Tommy say whatever he wanted, taking note of everything he could. Anything that might end up being useful.

By the time they reached their destination, night was starting to fall. Without Tommy, Dream probably would have walked right past it: the dark mouth of a cave, sinking into the side of a hill. They stopped a safe distance away, hidden by the trees.

“That’s the place,” Tommy said. His chatter had died down the closer they got. He looked nervous. “I think this is probably where I leave you.”

Dream took a deep breath, steeling himself. “Tommy,” he said to their companion, “thank you. Once we return, I’ll find a way to send you a message. You and Wilbur will be friends of Camelot.”

Tommy nodded back at him, his face bright, and then started to guide his horse back into the forest. Before he left, he twisted in his saddle and said, “good luck.”

Dream, Sapnap and Bad dismounted, tying their horses to a nearby tree and looking towards the cave, taking a moment to catch their breath.

“Well,” Sapnap said, adjusting his grip on his sword. “Should we do this?”

“I don’t see any reason to wait,” Bad said.

And Dream – Dream just stared at the entrance to the cave, his heart pounding in his chest, thinking that George was *there*. He was close. And he had been held here for days, alone. Thinking about what the Mercians might have done to him sent a chill racing down his spine, an angry flame sparking to life in his chest.

“We move now,” he said, and he unsheathed Excalibur. “We find him, we get out. Understood?”

He saw his friends nodding, and turned to them gratefully.

“You two are the best friends I could possibly ask for,” he said quietly. “Thank you. For coming, for – for talking sense into me. For everything.”

Bad gave him a soft smile, while Sapnap grinned.

“Someone’s gotta keep you humble,” he said, hitting Dream on the shoulder. “And without George, our chief humbler, to lead the charge –,”

“I get it,” Dream said with a short laugh, pushing Sapnap back.

Bad grabbed his shield, set his shoulders, and said, “let’s do this.”

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George had no concept of how much time had passed. He drifted in and out of consciousness, his hunger, dehydration, and fever pulling him back and forth on waves of fatigue.



He was going to die, probably. If the infection didn't get him, starvation eventually would. He lay on his side, curled in on himself, trying to get a grip on reality – trying to focus, to keep himself awake. But he was so cold, and his magic was gone.

Even though it made him feel pathetic, he missed Dream. He wished he could see him again. He wished – he wished he had told him sooner. Or that he had managed to convince him, in that short time they had before George was captured. He wished a lot of things, but mainly he just hurt, his mind consumed with it, with every place the pain was starting to become too much to bear. For now, he just focused on breathing, in and out, on the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

There were sounds coming from outside the door. They barely registered in George's head. Sounds – probably soldiers, maybe bringing some more prisoners?

But as he managed to focus on what he was hearing, he felt suddenly alert. It – it sounded like fighting. It sounded like iron clashing against iron – it sounded like the shout of spells, cut off at once. It sounded like footsteps, running just outside the door. It sounded like a shout –

“George?!”

He was *awake* with a start, and he tried to shout, but his voice stuck in his throat and he coughed instead, swallowing around what felt like cotton in his throat.

“Dream,” he managed, his voice rough, then again, louder: “Dream!”

An awful second passed where he wondered if he had taken too long –

And then the door slammed open, and Dream was *there*.

He looked wild from battle, blood splattered on his hands and Excalibur's blade, but he was there, alive, uninjured, fucking *beautiful*, throwing open the door to George's cell, crossing the space instantly and falling to his knees at George's side.

“George,” Dream said, grabbing him by the shoulders. He looked shocked at George's appearance. “Are you okay?”

George leaned forward, feeling the world spin dizzily around him. Dream had asked him a question, but he didn't know how to answer, didn't know how to do anything other than bring his hands up to touch Dream's face, gently, disbelievingly. “You came back,” he whispered, his eyes suddenly filling with tears.

Dream grabbed his hand, and George nearly sobbed as Dream said, “I should never have left.”

There was a shout at the doorway, and Dream whirled as the Mercian man who had been standing guard ran inside, wielding a sword. Dream grabbed Excalibur and surged upwards to meet him, their blades clashing together – Dream managed to shove the man backwards and smashed the sword out of his hands, ramming him against the wall of the cave and bringing the handle of his sword against the man's head. The guard fell to the ground, unconscious, and Dream returned to George's side almost immediately.

“Let's get out of here,” Dream said, grabbing his wrists – George tried to hide his wince. “How do we get these off?”

“I don't know,” George said.

“Can you – can you magic them off?” Dream asked.

George shook his head weakly. “They’re enchanted – I can’t do any magic.”

Dream muttered a curse and turned, looking around the cave. “Okay – shit. Here goes nothing,” he said, and he pressed Excalibur onto the chain linking George’s right wrist to the wall, pinning it between his blade and the ground. With a grunt, he shoved his full body weight forward, and the chain snapped.

George pulled his hand up, free, though the enchanted shackle still held tight to his wrist, and Dream moved towards the other chain.

But before he could break it, there was someone in the doorway, and George’s heart froze in his chest –

“Look out,” he shouted, pain seizing his arms as his magic instinctively tried to flare up, but it was too late.

Minx shoved her arm out and Dream was picked up and smashed against the wall, Excalibur clattering to the ground.

“No,” George cried as Minx stepped forward, her magic surging against Dream and pinning him against the wall. Dream struggled, and Minx’s fist clenched, and he made this awful choking sound, his head thrown back, his throat exposed. George saw his face twist in pain –

“STOP,” George screamed, yanking against the last, solid chain still holding him to the wall, his magic shorting out in his brain, his wrists *searing* against the shackles.

“It’s time for this to be over,” Minx said, staring right at Dream. Her eyes started to glow silver, and she brought another hand up, her magic cracking through the air.

Dream opened his eyes and he looked at George.

It was like the ground ripped open beneath him.

George felt himself screaming as he doubled over his chains, his magic surging against the enchantments like a flood against a dam.

He was on fire. His lungs were full of smoke, his eyes blinded by golden light.

The enchantments sent pain searing through his arms and straight into his heart, ratcheting through him, but – but their reach was pushed back by the light, overcome –

and then the shackles fell away, snapped apart.

George wrenched his arm forward and his magic slammed into Minx like a brick wall.

She lost her grip on Dream as she was thrown back, her magic crumpled and tossed aside like a scrap of paper. She gasped as George stood, unrestrained.

His eyes were the color of molten gold.

“Enough,” George said, in those two terrible voices at once. “Enough.”

Dream slid to the ground, a hand around his throat, gasping for air. He watched George with wide eyes as the sorcerer brought Minx closer to him, the witch struggling against his magic mid-air.

“You won’t win this war, Minx,” George said, his eyes alight. “You can’t.”

“Watch me,” Minx snarled, her face feral.

With effort, she pulled her arms up and severed the connection between her and George. And before he could get hold of her again, she was gone – disappeared through the door.

There was a moment where the golden light stayed, hovering silently inside of George, and George and Dream were left staring at each other, seeing each other truly for the first time.

And then the light expanded and released like a breath, fading away, and only George was left. George, who was barely conscious, wobbling on his feet.

His knees hit the ground, and he slumped forward, only barely catching himself with his hands. A small whimper escaped his lips.

Dream was at his side in an instant.

“I’ve got you,” he said, catching George by his shoulders and guiding him to lean against the bars of the cell. George’s face was pale and his eyes were screwed shut, but he was breathing.

“George,” Dream breathed, overcome with wonder. George’s eyes opened, and a laugh bubbled up from Dream’s throat. “George. You’re *amazing*. That – that was the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen.”

A small smile flickered across George’s face. “About time you appreciated my talents,” he managed softly.

Dream swallowed hard and nodded. “About time,” he said, and meaning flashed in George’s eyes.

“George!” came a voice from behind them, and when Dream turned, he saw Bad at the doorway, bloodied but standing, his eyes wide and relieved.

“We have to go,” Bad said, and Dream nodded, turning to George.

“Can you stand?” he asked, and George shook his head. “I’ll carry you.”

It was even easier than the last time – George felt thin, almost frail in his arms. But this time, as George leaned his head against his shoulder and Dream followed Bad out, running past the fallen Mercian soldiers and sorcerers they had left in their wake, finding Sappnap waiting for them at the entrance with their horses – this time, as Dream secured George behind him in his saddle, letting George cling onto him from behind as they raced towards Camelot, he knew that he would never, *never*, leave George behind again.

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It took George three days to wake up.

Dream spent most of the first day hovering around George's grandmother's house, trying to help her in any way he could. But it quickly became clear he was getting in the way more than he was helping, and she put a kind hand on his shoulder and told him that she could take care of George, for now, if he needed to return to the castle.

He took the hint.

He spent most of the second day nervously pacing in his quarters, which still felt cold, empty and dark, no matter how much light he brought in to fill it up. Luckily for him, the Mercian attacks had seemed to pause for the moment. He was able to hand off temporary responsibility to Eret – who he was learning to put more trust in every day. Eret was a capable knight, and a good leader, and when Dream apologized for asking him to take over for a few days, Eret had just smiled kindly and said, “I understand, Clay. Tell George I said hello when he wakes up, would you?”

Dream would. Dream would tell George a lot of things when he woke up.

On the third day, Dream raced for Sylvia's house the instant he heard the news. He barged in through the cabin door and then pulled up short.

George was sitting on a chair near the fire, fresh bandages wrapped around his chest. He was mid-laugh, his eyes crinkling up at the edges, talking to Sapnap and Bad, who had somehow beaten Dream there.

The door slammed open with Dream's aggressive entry, and George looked up at him, his eyebrows raising.

“Well, that was quite an entrance,” he said, grinning.

And Dream –

Dream couldn't help himself. The relief he felt at seeing George awake, alive, *happy*, was so strong that it pushed him forward. He practically swept George up in a hug, picking him up off of his chair, hearing George laugh and hug him back, his arms wrapping around Dream tightly.

“Careful,” Sylvia said from her table, and Dream put George back down right away, his face going red.

“Did I hurt you?” he asked, his hands hovering over George.

But George just rolled his eyes, smiling at him. “I'm fine, Dream.”

Sapnap and Bad gave each other looks.

It was so strange, the four of them sitting around the fire. The war hadn't ended, and they would have to return to that reality soon; but for the moment, the relief of having the four of them together and alive won over their worry and fear, and they talked and laughed like they used to when they were kids.

As happy as Dream was to be with his friends, though, he felt a tugging in his chest. He

wanted – *needed* to talk to George alone, and the weight of the words he had to say sat heavily in his chest. He caught himself drifting out of the conversation, staring at George, his forehead softly furrowing.

At one point, George caught him, and Dream blinked, looking away in embarrassment. But George leaned over and grabbed his hand, making Dream look back at him.

“Later,” George said softly, just for him, as Sapnap rambled on with some story about his battles with the Mercians. “Tonight.”

Dream’s breath caught in his throat, and he nodded.

“I think the lovebirds have tuned out,” he heard Bad say in a faux-whisper, and whipped his head around towards his smirking friends, his face going red.

“That’s --,” he stopped awkwardly, not wanting to say the wrong thing.

“What were you saying, Sapnap?” George saved him – and since when was he the smooth one here? But when Dream looked back at him, he saw a faint blush on George’s cheeks, his hands twisting nervously in his lap. It made Dream’s stomach do a stupid, helpless little flip.

They talked for a few hours, and then Sylvia shooed them away, saying George needed his rest. Dream, Sapnap, and Bad walked back in contended silence, the sun starting to set over the towers and parapets of the castle. Dream said goodbye to his friends at the doors, choosing instead to walk around the grounds of the castle, watching as the day’s activities wound to a close. The evening was cool, and the castle was calm, and Dream took deep, steadying breaths as he walked.

He was home. George was safe. The war would be fought tomorrow. Tonight, all they had to do was talk.

After a little while, he saw that the windows in his room were glowing with soft light. It was the sign he had been waiting for, and his pulse quickened as he made his way towards his quarters.

When he walked into his room, George was there.

He was sitting on the edge of Dream’s bed, staring at his hands. A lamp on the wall was lit, but the evening light in the room was muted, blue shadows hanging heavily over their heads. As Dream came into the room, George looked up, smiling softly. But he looked nervous - like Dream.

Dream moved slowly, but with purpose, coming close and then kneeling in front of George. George looked down at him, his face open and vulnerable, as Dream took his hands carefully in his own, his fingers brushing over the marks on his wrists left by the enchanted chains. George’s fingers curled, as if to hide the marks, but Dream brought each wrist to his mouth and kissed them gently, feeling George start to tremble.

“I’m sorry,” Dream said, looking up at George.

George’s eyes flickered across his face.

“I hurt you,” Dream said.

“I hurt you, too,” George murmured. “I lied to you.”

“But I know why you did,” Dream said. “You only lied because I was cruel. I was blinded

by my prejudice, by my father's prejudice. And – and I shouldn't have left you. I don't know if I'll ever forgive myself for what I did, George." His voice broke towards the end, and he dropped his gaze to their joined hands, thinking of the scars the Mercians left on George – the way he almost didn't recover.

But then George's hands moved to touch his face, tilting his head up so that he was looking into George's eyes, which were soft. "Then I'll just have to forgive you enough for the both of us," he said, his thumbs brushing along Dream's cheeks.

The words astonished Dream. "I don't think I deserve that," he said finally, feeling tears prick at the back of his eyes.

"Hm," George hummed, with a little smile. "You can make it up to me."

And then he leaned down and pressed a kiss to Dream's lips, so sweetly that Dream thought he might die.

George pulled back, and his eyes were dark and serious.

"We can make it up to each other," he said, searching for something in Dream's face.

Dream just nodded, suddenly unable to speak. He pushed himself up so he was sitting next to George, and then – carefully, so as not to hurt him – he pulled George with him towards the head of the bed. They rearranged themselves gingerly, George's arms looping around Dream's waist, Dream's chin resting on the top of George's head. He felt George burrow his nose softly into his chest, and this –

This was what he wanted. He would win the war for this, alone. He would throw himself into a thousand battles, if that's what it took to keep this safe. To keep him here.

"I love you, George," he whispered, and he felt George shift so that they were looking at each other, his eyes shining in the darkness.

"I love you, too," George said. Certain.

## Chapter End Notes

:D

The chapter count has been updated to reflect the fact that there will be two more updates to this story.

Next week: the finale! the ending! the war!

Shortly thereafter: an epilogue.

Thank you all so, so much for your support on this story so far! To be honest, I had a hell of a week, but your incredibly kind comments and messages have encouraged me to keep on track for updates throughout this entire story, and I appreciate you all so much. <3

I'll see you soon!

Chapter Notes

Here is the new and final full chapter! I really hope you enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*To His Highness, King Clay of Camelot:*

*I received your letter this morning and have sat down to write a response immediately, which I hope does not too much betray my eagerness. I was glad to hear from you, glad to hear that your friend was recovered safely, and above all, glad to know that we have made an ally in you and in Camelot.*

*Your words regarding Tommy were either far too polite, or otherwise served as confirmation of a long-held suspicion of mine that he reserves his worst for me and me alone. I'm sure he managed to torment you in one way or another, but I am relieved his plan to waltz in the front doors and persuade you of his good intentions actually worked. I was half expecting him to be executed on the spot – a feat I still haven't managed and would have hardly blamed you for.*

*I want to be of use to you in the coming conflict, though I think I should make my intentions perfectly clear. I do not consider myself a traitor to Mercia herself, for the Mercia I know disappeared some time ago. It has been taken over by the Circle – a group that has turned Mercia into an unrecognizable shadow of her former self. They are using Mercia as a machine for war, searching for conflict that need not exist.*

*I wish to help you defeat them, but I will not be party to a type of reciprocal conquest. By the end of this conflict, I hope to restore Mercia to her former self – as her own nation. I also hope to end this war with as few casualties as possible, as I believe you and I both understand that the men people like us conscript to fight our wars – the men who have no power or wealth to gain through the outcome – are yet the most likely to die in battle. I have no interest in needlessly slaughtering my countrymen.*

*If this aim is agreeable to you, I look forward to your next letter, and will keep you informed of any useful information to which I am made privy.*

*In solidarity,*

*Lord Wilbur of Mercia.*



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The war almost didn't feel real – like a relic from a time before Dream finally knew about George. But it was still coming, as steadily as the spring breeze that swept through the open window. And it gave George a similar chill as he moved to shut the window firmly against the wind.

He had never noticed how drafty Dream's room could be until he spent the remainder of his recovery there – a process which only took a few days, thanks to his gran's healing magic, which he no longer had to hide. Each day, Dream had returned from his war meetings later and later in the evening, looking harried and anxious. And George knew it was time for him to return to the war effort.

Still. Easier said than done. Especially when considering what *returning* actually meant for George now.

His anxiety getting the better of him, George turned around and said, "We don't have to do this, you know."

"I think we do," Dream said, coming out from behind the partition. He was wearing some of his finest robes, his red cloak pinned around his neck, his crown resting on his head in preparation for the war council meeting. He looked handsome, the sun lighting up the colors of his robes and glinting against his green eyes. George glanced away in mild embarrassment, still having a hard time believing that he was allowed to do this: to look at Dream this way, to touch him, if he wanted to.

"I could just keep helping from the background," George said, as Dream walked up to him, reaching out a hand to fix the collar of George's simple blue shirt. "Nobody else has to know."

"What are you afraid of?" Dream asked, searching George's face.

George bit the inside of his cheek. "I just know they're not going to like it," he said. "At least, not all of them. I don't want you to have to deal with more problems on my behalf."

"This is worth it," Dream said firmly. "Everyone needs to know about what you've done, George, and who you are. And they need to know that my father was wrong about magic. That things are going to be different."

His quiet self-assurance fortified George, not for the first time, and he nodded.

Then Dream said, "No more secrets. Not with other people, and especially not with each other. Okay?"

George met Dream's gaze and saw the sincerity there. He nodded, hoping that his honesty was coming through as clearly as he said, "No more secrets."

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“Attacks from Mercia have all but stopped in recent days,” Eret said, gesturing towards the map of Camelot still spread across the large round table. Around it stood every Knight of Camelot and a few advisors Dream had retained from his father’s council. At Dream’s side stood George, feeling entirely out of place. “The skirmishes at our borders, the attacks on villages – they’ve all halted.”

“Maybe they’re realizing they can’t win,” Ponk said, crossing his arms.

“I don’t see why they would think that,” Bad said, peering through his glasses. “Considering we haven’t actually *won* any battles yet.”

“Maybe they were set back when we attacked?” Sapnap asked with a shrug.

“But we didn’t actually do that much, except for getting George out,” Dream said, and George felt several gazes suddenly stab into him, like he was an insect being pinned against a board. He fought to hold himself steady. He knew several members of the council held private doubts about why the king had endangered himself to save his servant. They were probably even less pleased to see him at a war council.

“So it’s unlikely they’re retreating,” Eret said, his mouth pressing into a thin line. “Maybe... it’s just the opposite. They’re pooling their troops, getting ready for one major attack.”

“I think you’re exactly right,” Dream said, his forehead creasing slightly. “They know that they can’t keep picking away at us forever. If they’re really trying to take over, they’ll launch a full assault directly on the castle. They’ll try to overwhelm us.”

“Well, if our battles keep going the way they have been... they’ll probably win,” said Ponk, his voice heavy.

There was a moment of solemn silence as the knights stared down the reality of their situation. Dream looked at George, who nodded. *Now or never.*

“This battle won’t be like the others,” Dream said calmly, his voice ringing with characteristic self-confidence. He looked up at each person standing around the table. “This time, we’ll have magic, too.”

The words clearly shocked the gathered group; a few of them started to murmur amongst themselves, while others just stared uncomprehendingly at Dream. George made eye contact with Sapnap, who raised his eyebrows in anticipation.

“There’s something you need to know,” Dream said. George felt his hand on his shoulder, and then he felt the gazes of the council pierce him even sharper than before. “Many of you know George as my servant. But he’s much more than that. George is a sorcerer - a powerful one. And he’s going to help us defeat Mercia.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, and George braced himself for their reactions. Despite his knowledge – that he was in the right, that he was here to help, that Dream stood behind him – it took everything within him not to shrink from the situation, from standing up to a group full of nobility, a group that, very recently, had served King Daniel.

“George has magic?” Eret asked, his eyes wide.

“I do,” George said.

“And he’s used it to save my life many times,” Dream said. “Now, he’s going to help save

Camelot, too."

"King Clay," said a man named Elric, an older nobleman who had served many years in Daniel's court. He had graying hair and wrinkles around his eyes, which narrowed angrily as he took a step forward. "With all due respect, this is an outlandish proposition."

"How so?" Dream asked.

"Magic is the thing that threatens Camelot most, and your servant is no exception," Elric said with distaste, sending George a disgusted glance. "If he is a sorcerer, then he is no hero. He is a traitor!"

George took a breath, preparing to defend himself, but Dream was speaking before he could find the words.

"I know very well what my father thought of magic," Dream said, and the murmurs in the room went quiet. "It took me many years to understand how wrong he was. Magic is *not* inherently evil. And neither are sorcerers. George has been using his magic in service to Camelot for many years. He has a gift – a gift that will help us survive this onslaught."

"Magic has been outlawed in Camelot for decades, and for good reason, Your Highness," Elric argued. "You cannot make an exception just for your servant."

"Actually, I agree," Dream said, and George jerked his head to look at him. "Which is why, starting today, magic will no longer be outlawed in Camelot."

It was –

It was shocking, at first, a flood of surprise washing over George, and then there was just pure joy, a warm, light feeling that suddenly consumed him. He fought to keep his reaction from reaching his face as he just stared at Dream, whose face was determined, the afternoon sun glinting softly off of his crown. He was beautiful and – and so *Dream* in that moment.

He was everything George knew he could be, all along.

"Clay," Elric exclaimed indignantly, as surprised whispers broke out again among the gathered group. "You can't be –,"

"I understand that you may need time and answers to your questions," Dream said. "Lord knows I needed both before I saw why I was wrong. You, each of you, are allowed to question this decision, but you must do so with the intention of understanding why I am making it. If you cannot reconcile yourself to the idea of magic in Camelot, then you must excuse yourself from my court."

The words resounded. Elric looked downright furious, his face going red. Several of King Daniel's former advisors looked similarly unsure, although George thought the faces of the knights, who knew both Dream and George, looked significantly less disturbed – more surprised than anything.

"George," Dream said, and George turned to him. "Tell them what you can do to help."

George stepped up to the table, and although his heart still raced, Dream's steadfast presence at his side calmed him as he spoke. "There are many protective spells I can place around the castle," he explained. "These will make it harder for the Mercian sorcerers to attack the battlements. I can also enchant your armor and weapons, to help them withstand the Mercian's enchantments."

“You can?” asked Ponk, and George was gratified to hear the knight’s tone held more wonder than fear. “That’s been – that would be an enormous help to us.”

“I wish I could have done it sooner,” George said, and Ponk nodded slowly in understanding.

“Do you – can you heal the injured?” asked Eret, stumbling a little, as though he wasn’t sure what he was allowed to ask.

“Healing magic is difficult,” George said, “but not impossible. We – my grandmother and I, can prepare healing poultices with magic properties in advance. But it’s not an instant process.”

Eret nodded, his eyebrows furrowing in thought.

“I’ll fight with you during battle, as well,” George continued, looking around the table. “But there’s only so much I can do. I’m only one person.”

“George,” said Dream, touching him lightly at the elbow. “Tell them about the – the light.”

That took George aback. “The light.”

“It seemed to make you incredibly powerful,” Dream said. “Can you summon it on command?”

“No,” George said, surprised by this line of questioning. They hadn’t discussed this previously, and talking about it in front of other people felt suddenly vulnerable – like an invasion of privacy. “It’s – I’ve never summoned it intentionally. It just sort of... happens.”

“What are they talking about?” Ponk muttered to Sapnap, and George heard Sapnap respond, “I’ve seen it before. It’s a sort of power that overtakes George. He’s done some pretty amazing things with it. He saved Clay’s life.”

“But what *is* it?” Ponk repeated, turning to George.

“I... I still don’t quite know,” George said honestly, though Minx’s words rang distantly in his head. Her words were a lead, a clue to a mystery he had spent years unable to solve. “But I can try to figure it out.”

“I think you should,” Dream said. “If we can find a way to – to harness that power, to control it – I bet you’d be able to single-handedly push back the Mercians.”

Hearing the light described as a tool to be used felt wrong, somehow, to George, but he didn’t say so. Dream had no way of knowing how *personal* the light felt to him; how intrinsic, on a molecular level. And he was right, anyway. If George could figure out how to summon it, control it – to not rely on it swooping in at the last second, but to deploy it strategically – then they could feel confident going into battle.

“I’ll find a way to summon it,” he promised, and Dream nodded, giving him a smile.

This topic of conversation quickly became very interesting to the other knights, who spent the rest of the council meeting quizzing George over the boundaries and extent of his magic; what he could do, exactly, and how much time he would need. If their suspicion about the coming battle was correct, it could happen at any time: in a matter of days, or even hours. George started to feel his head spin with the list of things that needed to be done, but he set his shoulders and listened resolutely, thinking through the best way to expend his energy and finish as many tasks as possible

to fortify Camelot.

They talked well into the evening before Dream ended the meeting, ensuring everyone understood what they needed to do to help the effort. George was making his way towards the door, talking excitedly with Bad and Sapnap, when he saw Elric stop Dream.

“May I request a private word, Your Highness?” he muttered, and George turned his head sharply, seeing a shadow cross over Dream’s face.

“You may,” Dream said, and waved the other three on.

They lingered outside the Great Hall for a few minutes, discussing the best way to start fortifying the castle walls, when the doors suddenly flew open. Elric stalked directly towards George, his face alight with anger, and forced George to take a startled step back as he shoved a finger in his face.

“You are a traitorous snake,” Elric hissed. “I will not allow you to corrupt King Clay any further.”

“You’re wrong,” George responded, his pulse jumping, as Bad and Sapnap stepped to his side. “I am loyal to Clay and Camelot.”

“You may have the king fooled, but I see through you,” Elric said, his eyes narrowing. “If I have to take care of you myself, I will.”

The sound of a sword unsheathing stopped him, and Dream paced out of the Hall, holding Excalibur at his side.

“There is a limit to my patience, Elric,” Dream said, his expression stony. “And you just found it.”

Elric swallowed hard and took a few steps back. “Your Highness -,”

“Let me be clear,” Dream cut him off. “Any action against George is an action against the crown. He has my trust and is under my protection. Do you understand me?”

Elric clenched his jaw. “I will not stand by and watch you destroy Camelot.”

Dream sighed and shook his head. “Leave Camelot tonight, Elric. You will retain your title, but you can no longer serve on my council.”

Elric's eyes widened. “Clay -,”

“My decision is final,” Dream said, and then motioned George, Sapnap and Bad to follow him as he walked away.

“Your father would be ashamed of you,” Elric called after them bitterly, and George saw Dream’s shoulders stiffen.

Quietly, so that only George could hear, Dream muttered: “Maybe he would.”

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*To King Clay:*

*Your last letter surmised the situation in Mercia precisely. The lack of attacks in recent weeks is not for a lack of resources or desire, but instead reflects a tactical maneuver. The Circle is planning a full assault on Camelot soon. And they will bring every weapon, spell, and set of hands they can to that battle. Unfortunately, I have not been told exactly when the assault will take place; the Circle keeps me at arm's length, as they do for all non-magic nobility. The attack could be within weeks, days, or hours. I wish I could provide you with more certainty.*

*I was surprised, but happy, to hear of the shift in attitude towards magic in Camelot. I hope this means your friend, the sorcerer, will be able to aid in your war efforts.*

*I will write again, immediately, if I am to catch wind of the timing of the coming invasion.*

*In solidarity,*

*Lord Wilbur of Mercia.*

---

In all their years of knowing each other, Dream had never seen George so busy. Or so... happy.

He had a different kind of spirit about him, now, as he rushed around the castle, helping wherever he could with the war preparations that were now consuming the entire city. George spent hours enchanting the newly-forged weapons from the blacksmith, putting protections over armor, and casting wards over the castle battlements, strange words falling from his mouth as easily and naturally as his native language.

Dream had never noticed that George had been somewhat muted, somewhat guarded, until he saw the guard fall: saw the absolute light in George's eyes as he talked about new spells and tactics to try. He cast spells in the kitchens so that bread baked faster, and helped them stock shelves with little more than a flick of his wrist. When the sun set and it became too dark to work outside, George wordlessly created lights that hovered in the air and allowed work to continue.

He was amazing. And it became clear that he didn't need any help to do what he should, rightfully, have been doing all along. So mostly, Dream left George to his own devices, consumed enough with his own preparations: calling upon every lord in his kingdom to join the cause; coordinating shipments of supplies and rations; and finding places for the most vulnerable citizens of Camelot to take refuge, for the time being.

In the evenings, he would come back to his room exhausted, only to find George curled in an armchair by the fireplace, still poring over thick tomes, his reading glasses sliding down his nose. George would blink owlishly at him, the dark circles under his eyes matching Dream's, and they'd give each other small, tired smiles. Then they'd talk, for as long as they had energy to talk.

Their time together wasn't much, but it was enough, for now. Enough for them to feel fortified, grounded. Tied to each other, as everything else was thrown into chaos.

“What are you reading?” Dream asked on the first night, perching lightly on George’s armrest. The book in his lap was full of unintelligible scribbles.

“Looking for the light,” George answered simply, and that was the answer every night after.

Yet it seemed he was coming no closer.

“There’s nothing like it in anything I’m reading,” George said in frustration one night, as they sat across from each other. He looked even wearier than usual, exhaustion weighing heavily on his movements.

“Have you tried just... pulling it out?” Dream asked vaguely.

George looked at him in amusement. “It’s not like a rabbit in a hat, Dream. I’m not *that* kind of magician.”

That sparked a laugh from Dream. George could always make him laugh – even now. “You know what I mean.”

“It really isn’t like that,” George said, the firelight flickering on his face. “It’s always just... happened to me. I’ve never... well.” He stopped, his forehead furrowing.

“What?”

George glanced at him quickly. “When you died,” he said, and hesitated. “When Technoblade killed you. I... I guess I sort of summoned it, then. I just told it what I needed it to do. And then it did.”

It was so strange to hear – and Dream couldn’t help but imagine it, with a twist in his chest: imagined George huddled over his body, pleading with something he didn’t fully understand to save his life.

“You... talked to it?” he asked, and George nodded.

“It’s what Minx said, too. That it’s like... a person. Or it’s *personified*,” George said, sighing.

“Well, then,” Dream said, tapping his fingers against his knee. “Maybe the two of you need to have a conversation.”

---

*A conversation.* It made George laugh to even think about it. A conversation with his magic? A conversation with the energy animating his every step, the spark behind his very life? It was like thinking about having a chat with his blood or his breath.

But when he brought it up to his gran, more out of desperation than anything, she gave him a serious look. And then she gave him a few things to try: a certain type of tea, a candle to light that smelled like something foreign and earthy, and a set of instructions.

“Sit quietly. Light the candle. Drink the tea. Close your eyes and try to talk to it.”

“This is -,” George started, but then stopped. Was he really about to call this *ridiculous*? After everything that had happened?

“It might not work,” Sylvia said. “But it’s worth a try.”

So he did try, that evening, when he knew Dream would be preoccupied with meetings that didn’t require George’s presence. He lit the candle on the table, its flickering wick the only light in the room, sat cross-legged at the foot of Dream’s bed, and sipped the cup of tea that tasted like spice and red nettles. It had a bracing taste that seemed to clear out his lungs, letting him breathe clearly.

Feeling sort of silly, he closed his eyes. The room was still and silent around him, and he felt the space like an active presence around him.

“Hello?” he said aloud.

Nothing.

"Hello," he tried again. "It's me, George. I'm trying to talk to... the light."

George bit his lip and cracked an eye open. Nothing had changed.

He sighed. *This is dumb.*

But he had to give it a real shot. He had nothing else to do. So he closed his eyes again and let his mind wander.

He thought about the room he was in; thought about Dream, naturally, and how strange it was that everything between them had changed so quickly, and yet felt so immediately natural; like it was always meant to be this way. He thought about the upcoming battle, and how afraid he was that it would take away everything he had gained. He thought about trying to protect Camelot from the onslaught. He thought about summoning the golden light that seemed to have no limit to its power, and as he did, he felt his attention narrow in and spiral down a rabbit-hole of thought. He felt his breathing even out and deepen as he relived the experience of being consumed by that energy – in the cave, in the valley, at the lake. The way he had burned up from the inside each time, like his body could barely contain his spirit. The second voice he heard alongside his, so strange and so familiar all at once –

“Hello,” somebody said.

George opened his eyes and gasped.

He was sitting cross-legged in an open black void – Dream’s room gone, the tea vanished, the light extinguished, nothing but a velvet darkness extending infinitely around him. And across from him sat a figure made from pure golden light.

The figure was featureless and nearly impossible to fathom. The vague shape of a human, they were made up of the same shifting, shimmering tendrils of golden particles that George had come to expect in moments of crisis. They had no face, ethereal and genderless, and the light pulsed with its own sort of internal rhythm, following a beat George couldn’t hear.



“Hello,” George said back faintly.

The two of them inspected each other for a long moment. Or at least, George had the sensation of being inspected. The figure didn’t actually have eyes, per say.

“Who are you?” George eventually asked, feeling nervous.

“You know me,” the figure said.

“You’re... the golden light. I’ve seen you before. But I don’t know what you are. Are you my magic?”

The figure made a sound that George thought could have been amusement. “Not quite.”

George hesitated. “Can you please explain? Because I’m... I don’t know what’s happening. I don’t know anything about you.”

“It will be difficult for you to understand.”

“I want to try,” George said.

They tilted their head forward. When they spoke, their voice was melodic, shifting – impossible to pin down.

“I am an expression of what you call magic,” they said, “but I am not magic itself. Magic is far greater than that. It is everything. It is the rhythm. It is the pulse.”

“The pulse?” said George, uncomprehending.

“The pulse of the universe. The heartbeat of reality itself. The driving force behind every living thing, every action, every word. It is the song -,”

The light lifted their hands, and for a moment, George heard it –

Like a choir of voices, all joined in one awe-inducing, incredible song, an impossible tangle of voices and heartbeats – (and inside it all, George thought he could pick one voice out, could hear – )

The light dropped their hands and the song disappeared, and George was left gasping for astonished breath.

“Your connection to the pulse is very strong,” the light said. “*Very* strong. You understand the balance that must be maintained. For the song to continue. For the tempo to hold.”

“And who are you?” George asked again.

“I am a guardian,” they said simply. “When magic is threatened, I safeguard it. When Dream was born, when you arrived, I was summoned, as well. Summoned to protect you both. To ensure the prophecies are fulfilled, and magic is restored to Albion.”

George’s heart hammered in his chest. “So you’ll help us in this battle? You’ll make sure we win?”

The light shifted. “I can only do what I can do.”

“But you give me incredible power. Mercia doesn’t stand a chance, if you agree to come

when we need you.”

“You must understand, George,” they said. “When I express myself through your magic, it gives you great power. But I can only stay there for so long before you are hurt. Mortal humans are not meant to carry this energy for long. You must have felt this, before. Like you’ve been scorched from the inside?”

George swallowed, and thought about the burnt-out feeling, the exhaustion that usually followed the golden light. “I’ve felt it.”

“I can’t tell you where the border lies,” the light said, their ethereal voice taking on a somber tone. “I can’t tell you how much you can take. I’ve tried to temper myself to avoid hurting you. To come only when you truly need me. But the longer I inhabit you, and the more I do while I am inhabiting you, the likelier it is that your body will not be able to sustain itself. And you will die.”

“And what happens if I die?” George asked, his heart sinking. “Will the prophecies fail?”

The light hesitated for a long moment. As though they were trying to be tactful.

“In truth, your destiny is unclear, George,” they finally said. “Dream is the one who must live past this battle. Who must live to unite Albion. Your role – to protect him and change his heart – will be fulfilled in this conflict.”

“You’re saying I’m disposable,” George said, though his voice was without bitterness. He understood what they meant. If he needed to die to save Camelot, he could, without threatening destiny. Dream would live, and magic would be restored to the land, with or without him.

“I am saying fate is not a certain thing,” the light said. “It is not set in stone; it flows like water over a riverbed. Some of your direction is out of your control; but some is within your power. You should know what you risk in this battle, but you should not see it as inevitable.”

Then the light moved forward, and it brought two hands up to touch George’s face. Where their hands met his cheeks, George felt a strange, warm tingle, like shocks against his skin.

“When you need me, call me by my true name,” they said. “And I will come.”

And then they leaned closer and whispered a word into George’s ear that sent a shiver through his whole body, ringing with meaning.

When they moved away again, they said, “you have done well, George. When your time comes, you will be welcomed back into the song.”

George felt a rush of air against his face and closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he was sitting in Dream’s room. The only sign that any time had passed was the burned-down candle wick, the cooled mug of tea in his hands.

The light's name rang gently in his head like the sound of wind chimes.

---

“No,” Dream said. “Absolutely not.”

George felt the knight's gazes shift between the two of them. They stood on opposite sides of the large round table, staring each other down.

"It doesn't have to be our first option," George said. "But it has to *be* an option."

"It isn't one."

George sighed. "Clay."

The tone of his voice seemed to remind Dream of where they were, and he broke their standoff, glancing briefly around the council. "Let me speak to George alone, please."

When the door closed behind the last knight, an exhale escaped Dream's lips. He took off his crown and set it heavily on the table. They had been in war council for most of the afternoon. George's explanation of what the light had told him was clearly bothering him.

"How likely is this to kill you?" he asked.

George bit his lip.

"No more secrets," Dream reminded him.

"I honestly don't know," said George. "The light said - it depends. It depends on what I ask it to do, and for how long. But my - a human body isn't meant to hold it. If I use it for something too big... it could just burn me out from the inside. I'd be dead by the time it left."

The words made Dream visibly flinch, and he shook his head. "I want you to promise me that you're not going to do this," he said.

"I can't do that."

Dream's gaze went flinty. "I'd threaten you, if I thought it would mean anything."

George just kind of laughed.

"We're not sacrificing you," Dream said, coming around the table. "We're not sacrificing *anyone*, okay?"

"That's stupid, Dream, and you know it," George said quickly. "We're going to sacrifice plenty of people. You would sacrifice yourself, if you had half a chance."

And Dream hesitated. "Well - maybe. But it's my kingdom."

"I know," George said. "It's your destiny. It's mine, too."

Dream wouldn't take his eyes off him. "Counterpoint," he said, his voice even. "I can't lose you."

George scoffed lightly. "You'd be fine without me."

"No," Dream said, grabbing his hand. "I wouldn't."

George felt something deep and heavy in his chest.

"I love you," he said, and the words felt as shocking and true as the first time he had said them. "But if it comes down to me or Camelot - we both know what the answer has to be."

Dream's face flashed with something agonized, and he didn't speak. Because George was right. His words weren't angry or bitter or sad. They were just right. Dream was the king, and his duty was to Camelot. First and foremost. Forever.

"It might not kill me," George said, and he didn't have to fake the courage he felt. This was the right decision. "And I won't do it unless I have to. But if it comes down to it, I'll summon the light. Come what may."

Finally, Dream nodded slowly, though it looked like the motion might tear him in two. Then he lifted George's hand carefully to his mouth and kissed it.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I'm sorry this is who I am. That... that this is who I have to be."

George grabbed his face and looked directly into his eyes and firmly said, "You should never apologize for that."

---

*King Clay,*

*No news from Mercia, except that the gathering of the Circle's forces is continuing. I have to believe the attack on your kingdom is imminent.*

*There is something I must tell you which I hope will not ground our fledgling alliance.*

*I have in my company a man who has the capacity to carry out nearly anything we require of him. In the coming battle, which seems slanted against our favor, he may be essential. This man has no allegiance except to himself. But he owes me a favor, and in the short-term, I trust him to be useful.*

*The man I speak of is named Technoblade. I understand the two of you have a... complicated history.*

*Yet the strongest plan I can currently conceive of involves him fighting against the head of the Circle – Minx – perhaps alongside you. Your prowess as a warrior is well known throughout the Kingdoms.*

*Mercia will not be a snake without its head if Minx dies – in other words, her death will not be the end of the battle. But her death would decentralize their army. Ridding ourselves of Minx and winning the battle will give someone else the chance to step in and take power. If Technoblade takes on the mantle of killing Minx, it will allow me to be that person, and I will call an end to the war.*

*I pray you understand the nature of this request and receive it kindly.*

*In solidarity,*

*L.W.*

---

George and Sapnap found Dream on the castle battlements, looking out over the city of Camelot. George could see the conflict on Dream's face as plain as day. The two of them stood on either side of him.

"We do need their help," Sapnap ventured after a quiet moment.

"He literally killed my father," Dream said, his grip tight on the wall. "Or at least his accomplice did. And he tried to kill me."

"Yeah," Sapnap said. "And we *really* need their help."

Dream clenched his jaw.

"Do you trust Wilbur?" George asked, taking a different tack.

Dream shrugged. "I've never really met Wilbur. I don't know if I can trust him or not. His letters are..."

"Pretentious?" said Sapnap, with a snort.

A little smile threatened Dream's stoic expression. "I was going to say *eloquent*."

"Same thing, I guess."

Below them, knights directed citizens around the town square. The storefronts and homes that were closest to the castle were being boarded up, with the hope that as little damage as possible would be done to them during the invasion. Carts with horses loaded up the elderly, the very young, and the frail, taking them to a nearby city, where they would be kept safe for the time being. Every other able-bodied citizen was staying behind to fight and defend their home.

"Do we have a *choice* about whether to trust him?" George eventually asked, and Dream sighed.

"Not really," he said. "We're relying on Wilbur to inform us of the invasion. We're relying on his sabotage, to cripple the Mercian's offensive capabilities. And... he's right. We do need someone to take control of Mercia and stop the war after we win. If Wilbur kills Minx, he won't be able to do that effectively. It'll be seen as a power grab. Illegitimate."

"Do you think that's his goal?" Sapnap asked, and Dream shook his head.

"I... I don't think so. I really don't," he said, then stopped. "I don't really have a reason to think this, but I guess I do trust him. I just don't trust *Technoblade*." The name was full of venom.

"I don't think you have to," George said, and Dream tilted his head towards him. "If you trust Wilbur, and Wilbur says Technoblade will help in the short-term, that's all you really need."

"But can I bring myself to – to fight alongside him," Dream muttered. "That's the question."

Sapnap stretched his arms over his head with a little exhale and said, "well, Clay, man, here's how I see it. I'd rather see you working with Technoblade than straight up dying. You

know? So maybe it's the lesser of two evils here."

"Sapnap's right," George said. "You don't have to like him, or forgive him. But if he's useful, he's useful."

Dream nodded slowly. "That makes sense," he said hesitantly. Then he shook his head. "But if he makes one wrong move, I swear I'll kill him. And I'll do it right this time."

"Just *please* don't make me save you again," George said in mock exasperation, making Sapnap laugh. "That was exhausting."

"Yeah, and I don't want to see George get all dramatic again," Sapnap said with a cheeky grin. "It was *really* embarrassing for him." George leaned over to shove him.

"You're both idiots," Dream said, grinning despite himself. "But I'll do my best."

---

George was in the armory, placing spells over a new set of arrows so that they would burst into flame when shot, when Bad lurched into the doorway, his face pale.

"It's time," he said, and George's heart skipped a beat.

They ran to the Great Hall, their footsteps echoing through the eerily quiet hallways. When they barged in through the doors, the rest of the Knights had already assembled, with Dream standing in front of his throne. In the middle of the crowd stood a short, dark-haired servant boy, who looked properly out of his depth.

"Tubbo," Dream said kindly as he motioned George to his side. "Why don't you tell us again what you said to me earlier?"

The boy – Tubbo? – took a deep breath.

"I come from Lord Wilbur," he said, his voice wavering. "He received word this morning to report to the castle with all of his forces. The attack is happening tomorrow. They'll come from the north, and be here by midday."

His words, though spoken quietly, seemed to ring in the large room, and the group looked around at each other meaningfully.

"Thank you, Tubbo," Dream said. Then he turned to his knights.

"We've been preparing," he said calmly. And immediately, the mood in the room settled into one of quiet determination. "We've fortified the castle walls. We've gathered our troops. Now, we follow through on our plan. And we defend our kingdom."

"Bad," he said, turning. "You'll make sure the citizens get to safety before returning to fight."

Bad drew himself up.

"Eret. You'll go tell the men that we fight tomorrow."

Eret nodded.

“Everyone else, prepare yourself for what tomorrow brings,” Dream said. If he was afraid, George thought, it didn’t show at all in his face. It didn’t show at all in the way he held himself, strong, as though this were nothing but a matter of routine. As if his life, and all of their lives, and the fate of his kingdom, didn’t hinge on the battle to come. “Remember, tomorrow, that although you may fight in my name, you do not fight for me. You fight for this kingdom, for the people who inhabit it. You fight for the existence of a fair and peaceful nation. And you fight for yourselves, for your lives and your futures. I know that each of you will do Camelot proud. Now, go.”

And the knights left, surely, stoically, for their allotted tasks.

Dream then moved towards Tubbo, who was staring at him with wide eyes. “Tubbo,” he said. “I need you to return to Wilbur. And I need you to give him this.”

He handed Tubbo one last letter – one that had been drafted and redrafted many times.

“That will tell Wilbur exactly what we need him to do, and when,” Dream said. “It is vitally important that he gets this information. Do you understand?”

Tubbo nodded resolutely. “I understand, Your Highness.”

“You’ll have to leave immediately. You won’t have time to rest. Do you need food or water?”

“I have enough,” Tubbo said, glancing briefly at George. “Tommy told me about you, you know.”

George felt a spark of fondness. “What did he say?”

“That you were all a bunch of crazy bastards,” Tubbo said, with a sheepish grin. “Which is basically the highest compliment you can get from Tommy, I think.”

George laughed, and Dream mused, “Well, maybe we are. But that makes you one, too, Tubbo.”

Tubbo nodded, his eyes gleaming. “I’ll get this to Lord Wilbur safely. I promise.”

And then he left, leaving George and Dream standing alone in the Great Hall.

“How do you feel?” George asked, and Dream sent him a glance. “You know what I mean.”

“I feel ready,” Dream said, and his voice was still unwavering, his shoulders set firmly. “We’re going to win this, George. I know it.”

---

(It wasn’t until that night, alone in his room, that Dream started to shake, his hands trembling where they touched George, gentle yet desperate, like it was the first time and the last time they might ever have this – might ever have each other. And George – George, who was surer of this than anything, sure that the battle would be won tomorrow, but unsure, unsure if he would see the other side of it – he just pulled Dream close, memorizing every touch, every kiss, hoping

above all other hopes that they would have this again.)

---

The morning was cool and quiet. The calm before the storm.

They woke slowly, and at the same time, spending a moment just looking at each other, as though they could stay in bed and never rise to face what was coming.

But they couldn't. So they rose, soon, and got dressed – and then George was inspecting Dream's armor, which sat waiting on its stand next to George's. He had never worn armor before in battle, and was resistant to it even now, but Dream had convinced him into a thin layer of chainmail that would at least protect him from a wayward arrow.

Dream's hand smoothed over his back, and George turned his head.

"Will you help me with this?" Dream asked quietly, his eyes soft.

"Of course," George said, a shiver running down his spine.

His movements were automatic and yet still felt achingly intimate as he started helping Dream into his armor, sliding the chestplate over his head, fastening his gauntlets to his forearms. He thought, maybe, that he must have been doing this the first time he realized he was in love with Dream; the way his heartbeat picked up from the proximity to him, the way he felt every touch so acutely. He still felt those things. He wondered if they would ever go away.

"I'll have to get someone else to do this for me, after the battle," Dream said, and George looked up at him sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you certainly won't be a servant anymore, once all this is over."

The sentence took George aback. He supposed he hadn't thought about that.

"You're saying you want to replace me?" he said lightly, guiding Dream to turn around so he could lace the knots up his back.

That got a good laugh out of Dream, and George had to pause for a moment, smiling to himself, until his laughter stopped shaking his torso. "I mean, you *have* been slacking on some of your duties recently."

George hummed, finishing the knots and turning Dream back around. For a moment, the everpresent lines of worry and responsibility on Dream's face had disappeared, and he drank in the sight.

"Even if you get another servant," George said, "I want to do this for you."

Dream looked at him quizzically. "...why?"

George shrugged, and then smiled, as he finished fastening the straps of Dream's gauntlets. "We can't have *another* one of your servants falling in love with you."



Dream laughed softly. “You’re *jealous*, George.”

“Maybe.”

George stepped back to survey his work and found it satisfactory. But before he could call it done, Dream stepped forward, grabbing him by his wrist.

“Let me help you with yours?” Dream said, and George stopped short.

“I – you don’t have to. I was just going to do it myself,” he said with a little laugh.

“I want to,” Dream said, and –

It shouldn’t have mattered so much. It shouldn’t have made George’s chest feel like it was melting and freezing at the same time. It shouldn’t have made him feel like he was caught up in something dangerous, something he couldn’t control. But that was how it felt, as Dream picked up the chainmail and started placing it on him the way George had done a million times – as Dream helped fit the simple chestpiece over his head, fitting the armpieces into place and tying the knots, his hands less practiced but still capable and sure.

“How do you even know how to do this?” George asked.

“I learned from the best,” Dream said, glancing at him.

“You’re so dumb,” George mumbled fondly, the words sounding faint and far-away. Overcome by thoughts of how much he loved this man. Fully, completely. It was overwhelming, at times. And this was one of those times.

When Dream was done, he did what George had done a thousand times: he stepped back, his eyes running over his work, and he nodded.

“There,” Dream said. “Safe.”

And George moved forward, reaching up, his hands sliding up his neck to cradle Dream’s head. Then he pulled him down into a kiss, pouring everything into it and feeling him do the same.

They broke apart, but stayed close to each other for a moment, their breaths mingling. George drank everything in. Trying to memorize it.

“You’ll see the other side of this battle, Dream,” he said, sweeping his thumb over his cheek. “I know it.”

“So will you,” Dream whispered, his voice almost breaking. “Promise me.”

George just looked at him for a long moment. Then he said, “I love you, Dream.”

“George,” Dream said, and pushed forward into another kiss, this one sadder, if just as sweet.

---

The sun was no more than a pale disc, obscured by soft gray clouds stretched thin like cotton over the sky. The air that hung over Camelot was just as gray, and full of muffled tension, as

its people waited for an attack.

There were archers stationed all across the castle battlements, readying their bows and arrows. Outside the castle walls, knights and soldiers stood in their formations, waiting for the signal – waiting for their enemies to appear from the forest. The streets of Camelot themselves were barren and quiet, devoid of the usual life that animated them.

Bad stood with his soldiers – the group of men he had been tasked with leading. He walked through their ranks, talking to each one of them, ensuring they were prepared for what was to come. Sarnap stood with his own battalion, his gaze flinty as he stared at the northern treeline.

Dream and George rode to the front of the army on their horses, Dream's red cloak billowing behind him. They stopped to survey the gathered group.

"Here we are," George remarked.

Dream exhaled and nodded. "We're ready."

"You have any more wise words left for them?" asked George, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't think there's anything else I could say that I haven't already."

Dream turned to look at the forest. From the north, Tubbo had said. Once they came through the trees, Camelot would meet Mercia halfway, hopefully to stop them from ever reaching the castle. The archers would rain down arrows from their vantage point on the battlements, while Dream had tasked Wilbur and his allies with disabling as many of the Mercians' catapults as they possibly could without being detected.

In many ways, they held the element of surprise that the Circle probably thought was theirs. They knew the invasion was coming, and had prepared. And they had the enchantments and spells that George had worked so hard on over the past few days, which the Circle probably hadn't anticipated.

But Dream couldn't help the dread that pooled in his stomach, and couldn't shake the eerie feeling settling in over his head.

"If you need me," George said, pulling Dream out of his thoughts, "you call for me. And I'll hear you."

Dream looked at him and nodded. "You, too. If you need me. I'll be there."

George nodded back.

That was all they could say to each other before they heard Eret shout, "there they are!"

Dream turned and saw them.

It was like a wall coming through the forest, a mass of people and horses and war machines, surging through the treeline, which stood about two hundred yards away from the castle walls. There were hundreds of them, wearing and waving the Mercian colors, green and silver, and when they caught sight of the Camelot army, waiting for them, there was a cry that started up from their side, their swords and shields glinting as they were drawn.

Dream unsheathed his own sword and turned to his army, raising his sword in the air.

“For Camelot!” he cried.

“*For Camelot!*” came the responding cry, louder than thunder.

So it began.

The two armies barrelled towards each other, the sound of hoofbeats pounding into the earth and the war cries of the opposing sides filling Dream's ears. As he flew across the field towards the Mercians, he heard George shout, “**leothbora,**” and ahead of them flew a blinding white light that seemed to swallow up the first few waves of Mercians for just a second. They slowed, stunned, just as the Camelots fell upon them, giving them the advantage –

And then it was the clash of swords, the clang of metal on metal, as Dream launched himself from his horse and towards the first Mercian soldier he could find, a man nearly half a foot higher than him who swung heavily with his sword. Dream ducked it easily and slashed Excalibur against his chest, throwing him to the side. *One down* –

He caught a glimpse of George twisting the arm of a Mercian on his horse with his magic and knocking him to the ground, sending the horse careening away – on his left, he saw Sapnap, alight with battle, bringing his sword down in a glowing arc. The Mercian weapons, also glowing with enchantments, no longer had the same crippling effect on the Camelot soldiers – they could no longer cut through their armor, destroy their blades – George's magic was doing its work, giving them an even playing field.

On an even playing field, they could win.

Dream felt courage surge in his chest and he pressed onward, fighting back wave after wave of Mercian soldiers, remembering his promise to Wilbur and killing as few of them as possible, satisfied with dealing serious blows, sending people packing. A sorcerer threw her hand out towards him and he brought Excalibur to bear, waiting to absorb the spell; but what she threw at him wasn't magical energy, but a kind of ball of fire, which pushed him back in a wave of heat that scorched his exposed hands. Dream gasped in surprise and rushed forward before she could utter the spell again, running her through with her blade and throwing her to the ground. He hissed and clenched his fists, pushing the pain away with another surge of adrenaline as someone else came up behind him and he had to parry another blow.

Dream lost himself to the haze of battle. His instincts kicked in, his years of training, of preparation, for exactly this moment; he kicked and slashed and blocked, and felt momentum carrying him through, relatively unharmed. He saw a catapult, holding a kind of flaming ammunition, fall apart in front of him – *Wilbur's sabotoge*, he realized gratefully – but he saw another successfully launch towards the castle walls. He lurched around and saw it slam against the battlements, smashing into the top of the wall and sending a few Camelot archers flying.

“The walls,” he whispered, taking a step towards them, because after all, if the castle was captured, the battle was lost –

But before he could get too far, he saw George, racing for the walls himself, throwing out a hand and stopping the damaged section from collapsing even further. Relieved, Dream returned his attention to the battle at hand just in time for him to block a blow from a battleax, held by a leering soldier.

Periodically, he scanned the field for the woman with silver hair – Minx. He knew he had to find her, had to defeat her, had to *decentralize* the army, as Wilbur had put it. But the Mercians just kept coming, dozens and dozens more through the trees, like there wasn't any end; and Dream

found himself suddenly lost in the thick of a battle he was suddenly unsure he could win, fending off several blades at once, seemingly alone – no other Camelot colors in sight.

Dream took a hit against his chest, his armor protecting him from the blade but still knocking the breath out of him, and he stumbled back, pulling Excalibur up to block another hit just in time. He tried to push his attacker back but suddenly felt a heavy weight slam against his side, and he went flying, hitting the ground and turning to see a sorcerer pacing towards him, his hand up, his mouth twisting as he spoke: “**drepa --**,”

Before the spell could be completed, Dream saw the sorcerer’s eyes go wide as a sword suddenly plunged through him from behind, impaling him on the blade. The sorcerer was thrown to the ground –

And Technoblade looked down at him, breathing heavily, his face as wild and full of bloodlust as the last time Dream saw him.

The two froze in the middle of the frenzied battle, staring each other down.

Then Technoblade extended his hand.

“Reckon that makes us even?” he said, though he didn’t look too pleased to be saying it.

Dream grit his teeth, but took the proffered hand. As Techno pulled him to his feet, he said, “We’re not even. Not yet.”

Techno’s eyes narrowed, and then he pushed past Dream, bringing his sword up to parry a blow from a soldier who had run up from behind him. He shoved his weight forward and threw the Mercian soldier to the ground, and Dream stabbed him. “I seem to remember us killin’ *each other*, you know.”

Dream whirled around and slashed Excalibur against an approaching soldier, hearing Technoblade do the same behind him. “For the death of my father,” he said, Excalibur clashing against the Mercian’s blade, “you still owe me.”

“Fair enough,” Technoblade grunted, throwing away another attacker. He lifted a hand and said, “**brégan**,” and a horse spooked, rearing into the air and throwing its rider off. “Wilbur wants me to help you kill Minx.”

“Yeah,” Dream said, turning to face him for a moment. “I know.”

“I owe Wilbur,” Techno said, evaluating him. “I don’t feel like owin’ you.”

“You help me with this,” Dream said, “and we’re even.”

Technoblade nodded shortly.

He lifted his hand and pushed back a wave of soldiers with another muttered spell, and the two of them forged on.

---

The walls were crumbling. George was doing everything he can, running from spot to spot

and pushing the stones back into place, but he was doing nothing more than damage control. And he was losing.

Frantically, he looked around. The Mercians had dozens of catapults set up along their side, some disabled, but others launching flaming stones at the Camelot walls, far stronger than the basic protection wards he had put up.

George took a deep breath and focused.

The next time a catapult launched a flaming projectile into the air, George threw his hands forward and stopped it, then sent it straight back. The stone crashed into the catapult and destroyed it, shattering it into a hundred pieces.

George heard a few whoops coming from the archers on top of the walls. He turned and saw them waving and cheering for him, and couldn't help but grin.

He took out the rest of the catapults, one by one, until their flaming messes dotted the landscape, giving the battle an even more hellish appearance. He scanned the battlefield, but couldn't find Dream – just saw a mess of red and green colors clashing, metal glinting in the air, and –

and Bad – running towards him – supporting an injured Sapnap on his shoulder.

“George!” Bad shouted, and George raced towards him, grabbing Sapnap by his other arm. The knight's face was pale, and he was bleeding badly, blood dripping from his hands onto the dirt.

“We need to get him to a healer,” George said, looking up urgently for the nearest medical tent.

“I'll be fine, guys, come on,” Sapnap said hoarsely, trying to pull himself up and stumbling again with a little hiss.

“You will be fine if you just let us help you,” Bad nearly shouted, though he wasn't panicking – just moving with urgency. “George, I'll take him. They need you out there.”

George turned and saw he was right. Despite the enchantments, despite everything he had done – it wasn't enough. There were too many sorcerers, and he watched as the Camelot army was pushed back, bit by bit, magic users throwing Camelot soldiers back with little more than flicks of their wrists, advancing slowly but surely.

He let Bad take Sapnap away and ran towards the front lines, his mind racing. He had to stop as many of the Mercian sorcerers as possible, but he didn't know how to – not on any level larger than fighting them one by one, which is what he started with, lunging in front of a Camelot soldier and stopping a sorcerer from knocking him back, twisting the sorcerer's arm and sending her to the ground. George also wasn't – wasn't used to fighting like this, not really, wasn't used to using his magic out in the open, in front of everyone; hadn't practiced, didn't know exactly what to do, and sometimes the other magic users got the better of him, knocking him back a few steps, outmaneuvering him just so –

Still, he was able to stem the tide of magic a little bit, enough to let the other soldiers get a few hits off as he froze the other sorcerers in their tracks.

The whole time, he looked for Dream and couldn't find him.

*Dream can take care of himself, he thought, and he'll call for me, if he can't,* and focused

on the task at hand.

---

It could have been minutes or hours later when Dream finally caught sight of her.

“There,” he shouted, and Technoblade whirled.

Minx was hovering a few feet off the ground, her eyes glowing the same silver as her hair, her gray dress billowing below her. A manic grin on her face, she was alight with battle and magic, and she shouted orders to her nearby generals as she knocked back anyone who came close.

“Keep pressing forward!” she shouted, her hands clenching and crackling with energy. “Not even George can handle us all at once.”

Dream felt a panicked stutter in his chest.

“You ready?” he asked, and hatefully, he admitted that he was glad to have Technoblade there, as the other man brought his sword to bear.

“Let’s go,” Techno said, and they surged forward.

They must have taken Minx by surprise, because they were able to rush up behind her, and it wasn’t until Dream was swinging Excalibur through the air that she whirled, stopping him mid-air. Despite Excalibur fighting against her spell, there was a struggle, Minx grinning down at Dream.

“Hello again, Dream,” she said, the use of his real name taking him by surprise, and then she wrenched his arm to the side.

Dream stumbled away, gasping for air, as Technoblade lifted a hand, shouting, “**ástríce!**”

The spell might have been a drop of water against a hurricane. Minx shot the assassin an amused look.

“Technoblade,” she said, her voice ringing strangely. “And all this time, I thought we were friends.”

She brought a silent hand up and Technoblade suddenly choked, scrabbling at his throat as she closed her fist tightly.

Dream threw himself towards her again and this time made contact, ramming his shoulder into her and knocking her to the ground, where she stumbled, releasing Techno from her grip. When she turned, the silver in her eyes flickered only slightly.

“You’re stupid to come here without a competent sorcerer,” she said. “And Blade doesn’t count. He barely knows three spells.”

“Don’t need ‘em,” Techno said, bringing his weapon to bear.

“Actually,” Minx said, “you do,” and then she brought her hands up again, one for each man.

With only half her attention focused on him, Excalibur was able to absorb Minx's spell this time, and while she sent Techno flying to the ground, Dream was able to rush her, slashing his sword through the air. She dodged just in time, but Excalibur nicked her shoulder, leaving a dark cut.

Minx whirled, furious, and threw both of her hands towards Dream; and suddenly it was like gravity was working tenfold against him, dragging him to his knees, a crushing weight preventing him from lifting his arms. He struggled against her grip as she came closer –

This time, Techno was the one to get a swing off, but this was even less successful than Dream's attempt; she seemed to sense him behind her and turned just in time, bringing up a piece of the earth in one vicious movement that knocked Techno's sword away, bashed against his head, and sent him flying to the ground, dazed.

"You really are idiots, both of you," she snarled, and turned back towards Dream.

A nearby explosion suddenly rocked them both, distracting Minx enough for Dream to scramble away. A catapult had burst into flames – its projectile somehow turned back onto it.

"That --," Minx cut herself off with an enraged scream, sprinting towards the flaming weapon. "What's happening?" she shouted to her soldiers. "Why are these all being destroyed--?"

"George," Dream whispered to himself, amazed, but then suddenly despairing.

He didn't know how to beat Minx. He didn't know how – she was too powerful, more in her element than anyone else on the field. And all around him, he saw the telltale signs of defeat: Mercians, pushing Camelot soldiers back bit by bit, because of the sorcerers – the *sorcerers* - there were too many of them, and it was too hard to fight back when you couldn't summon that kind of raw power. George was only one person, he could only do as much as he could do – and if they couldn't push the Mercians back soon, they would take Camelot; it would be lost –

"George," he whispered again, and he hoped that what George had said was somehow true - that he could somehow hear him. "We need help."

---

George heard.

If he didn't actually hear the words, he could feel the intention behind them. And he could see what was happening with his own eyes.

Minx was still alive. And so was Dream – he knew that –

But the sorcerers were too powerful. They were fighting a losing battle.

George stood in the wreckage of the battle, standing among those who had already fallen, and he looked around him. Arrows flew down like rain, swords flashing like lightning – so many lives lost, already, to a meaningless conflict. A pointless war. A battle that needed to end.

He took a shaky breath. He knew what would end the fighting, but it was something he

couldn't possibly do on his own.

And with a terrifying, dismal ache in his chest, he knew the time had come.

"George," a shout came from behind him. He turned to see Bad, running towards him, a bloodied sword in his hand.

"Stand back," he said in warning, holding out a hand. Bad paused.

"Is it --," Bad stopped, his face falling. "Are you doing it?"

"It'll be okay," George said, unsure if he was lying. "Just stand back, Bad."

But he didn't. He crushed forward for a split second, burying George in a hug that he suddenly returned, frantically, to one of his oldest friends. And then Bad broke away, stumbling a few steps back.

"If this doesn't work," George said, "tell everyone – just – just tell them --,"

But he couldn't think of what to say, so he just nodded, and Bad just nodded back.

And then George turned towards the battle, and he took a deep breath.

**"Feorhyrde."**

He called the light's name, and the light came to him.

It was like a switch flipped.

Every other sound suddenly vanished. George inhaled, and that was all he heard; the rush of breath in his ears, the pulse in his chest, which was suddenly paired with and drowned out by the sound of another pulse: the sound of a stronger heartbeat, a drum, that swept him up, coming from within and without at the same time.

The golden light was there, around him, consuming him, and he felt himself float several feet into the air, giving him a better view of the battle, which seemed so small and faraway already. George forced himself to focus through the sheer overwhelm of having the light within him, clenching his fists and feeling the power there.

**What do you want me to do?** the magic asked.

George extended his hands, and he told it.

**Stop this. Stop what you can.**

The light burst out and expanded from him immediately, flooding over the castle walls,



over the battlefield, over the Camelot and Mercian armies, encompassing the entire scene.

George closed his eyes, saw the light burning behind his eyelids, and surrendered himself to it.

---

The effect was almost instantaneous.

The strange golden light which had suddenly swept through the battle didn't stop the Mercians from attacking – but when the sorcerers brought their hands up and shouted their spells, nothing happened. It was as though they were shouting into a void, throwing a pebble against a mountain.

Their magic simply didn't work. The golden light had fallen over everything. It was magic - pure magic. And it certainly wouldn't let it be used against itself.

---

Dream and Techno realized this quickly, when Techno tried to bring his hand up to stop a coming soldier, but his spell didn't work. Dream parried the blow instead, throwing the soldier away, as Techno stared blankly at his hand.

“Whatever’s happenin’ right now,” he said, “my magic isn’t workin’.”

Dream took one look at the golden light and he knew.

“Now,” he said, his breath catching in his throat. “We get Minx *now!* –”

And without a second’s hesitation, the two of them grabbed for their weapons and rushed towards the woman, who was staring at her own hands, her face panicked and furious.

“No!” she screamed, clenching her fists, but no magic came. “This isn’t fair. This can’t be -  
,”

Technoblade ran her through with his sword before she could say another word.

---

It was the same everywhere. The Camelot soldiers caught on quickly.

The archers restrung their bows, and this time their arrows hit. Swords made contact – soldiers pushed forward.

The Mercian sorcerers, finding themselves defenseless, scrambled back towards the forest, their faces terrified as they took in the sight of George, suspended in mid-air, his eyes glowing like molten gold, the light pouring from his chest with no signs of stopping. The soldiers, seeing this, took startled steps back.

“Retreat!” came a shout, as Minx fell – it was Wilbur, who motioned the Mercians away, taking his cue perfectly on time. “Fall back! Retreat!”

And the Mercians did – first the sorcerers, terrified and defenseless – and soon the soldiers, finding themselves outnumbered, outmatched, and lacking their usual protection. The Camelot soldiers pushed forward with triumphant shouts, pushing them back from the crumbling castle walls, watching them retreat into the forest.

And on the battlefield, one sorcerer with long, silver hair slumped to the ground, dead.

---

George, at this point, was almost entirely unaware of what was happening.

The light blinded him, burning into his eyes. He felt it more strongly than he had ever felt anything: the fire in his chest, consuming him, energy expending in a way it never had before – not only enacting his will, but taking away the ability of hundreds of others to enact their own –

It was working, and George was losing himself to it.

---

Dream could see him, even from a distance -

He could see George, suspended in mid-air, the light streaming out of his hands and from the center of his chest, pouring from his eyes and his mouth. It was getting difficult to tell George apart from the light at all, and Dream felt frozen, paralyzed in fear, remembering what George had said – that it might just burn him out completely, that he might never come back from it – and Dream had *let him* -

“Go, already,” he heard Technoblade say, and he was sprinting across the field, stumbling over the carnage of battle, unable to see anything except George, *George*, who had just saved them all -

---

The light’s rhythm was overtaking his own, now; his heartbeat bending to the will of its pulse; and distantly, he could hear music – *music*; it was wild and awful and beautiful, and he gasped, wanting, and needing, to go closer to it.

Distantly, he thought he heard the voice of the light say sadly, **I warned you**, but he couldn’t think of what it meant; couldn’t think of what he might need to be warned about, anyway; these were all concepts that were so far away, now, so distant and forgettable; and he felt himself drifting closer to the sound of bells –

There was another voice. A voice in harmony, though not in tempo, with the music.

And he stopped.

It was there, again. Closer, this time. Louder.

“*George!*” it said.

That name sounded familiar. He couldn’t quite place it. Was it his name? The light shifted around him.

“*George!*” the voice called again, and he gasped, because – he – he knew the voice. He knew –

“Dream,” he felt himself say, his mouth thick with cotton, and he remembered that he could speak. Remembered that he had a mouth, that he had a body, and limbs, too, though he couldn’t quite – find them –

He felt a hand on his ankle, which brought him crashing back into his body, his body which was *burning*, like he was on the pyre he used to fear so much. He cried out in pain, the memory of every nightmare crashing back into his head at once. He was living them, now, living them all at once.

But Dream’s voice came to him again – “George,” he said, crying out desperately: “come back, please, come back to me.”

And George tore air into his lungs.

“Leave me, please,” he begged the light. “I – I want to go back.”

He felt something like a hand against his cheek. **It will hurt. It will not hurt, if you rejoin the music.**

“I don’t care,” George sobbed. And then -

“I need you, George,” Dream said, his words cutting through louder, even, than the light’s.  
“I need you here. *Please.*”

And there was nothing more important. Nothing. Nothing that could stop him, or tempt him away, from going to Dream.

“I want to go to him,” George told the light, and the light said, **very well.**

It left him in a rush, leaving him burned-out and hollow.

George fell from the air like a stone and crashed into Dream’s arms.

## Chapter End Notes

The final chapter of Protected (along with a much longer, much sappier end note) will be published tomorrow, yes, TOMORROW! Monday, November 9, 2020.  
(Actually, I'm posting this so late that that is already today. Ha)

Thank you all so, so much for reading! <3

## after (epilogue)

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

### after

The sun cast golden hues over the land as it began to set, dipping slightly below the enormous parapets and spires of the towering castle that stood grandly at the center of Camelot. Though the day's work had ended, the activity of the evening had only begun, as people spilled into the streets and onto the castle grounds, talking excitedly amongst themselves.

In the days following the battle, the wounded had been treated – the dead buried and mourned. There were far fewer dead than most had anticipated, miraculously – their numbers cut short by the amazing light that had swept through Camelot in rumors and stories that would soon become myth. George had become a legend in his own right. And now, Camelot was safe, its citizens returning to their homes, a buzz of excitement in the air.

Tonight, there was to be a feast.

"A feast," the head cook complained bitterly, amidst the chaos of the kitchen. "Less than a week after the castle was nearly destroyed."

"But it *wasn't* destroyed," his assistant said with a grin, her hands and apron dusted with flour. "That's *why* there's a feast."

"Still. King Clay could have given me a little more time to prepare," the cook argued back, but he wasn't truly angry. Nobody was. Celebrations were being held across the entire city- across the entire kingdom, really - and the joyous atmosphere was hard to resist.

The war with Mercia was over, and Camelot was safe.

"Woah, woah, woah," Bad said, rushing across the Great Hall. "Sapnap, get *down* from there. Oh, my goodness."

“What?” Sapnap asked from the top of the ladder, where he was helping pin up decorations on the ceiling. “I’m helping!”

“You literally just got stabbed,” Bad worried from the floor, holding onto the bottom of the ladder as though to steady it.

“I’m already better, Bad,” Sapnap said, but when he leaned up a little higher to try and pin the garland, he had to hide a little wince at the stretch in his chest. “Ow. Okay... maybe these healing potions aren’t an instant fix.”

“That’s literally what they told you,” Bad said, but when Sapnap reached the ground, he just gave him a small, relieved smile as other people bustled around them, busy with preparations.

“I don’t know if I thanked you,” Sapnap said, suddenly looking embarrassed. “For helping me during the battle.”

Bad gave him a look. “Sapnap,” he said dryly. “No offense, but you are very dumb if you think you have to *thank me* for making sure you don’t *die*. Give me a little credit as a friend, here.”

Sapnap laughed and slung his arm across Bad’s shoulders. “I do, Bad. I do.”

“Can you believe we can’t go to the feast?” Tommy grumbled from Mercia.

“I don’t think it would be very proper,” Tubbo said cheerfully as he continued washing dishes. The two of them were living in the Mercian castle, now; with the Circle effectively disbanded, Wilbur had taken charge of the country for the time being, and possibly forever.

“Oh, whatever,” Tommy said, leaning against the wall and watching Tubbo do his chores. “Wasn’t very proper for us to help them, either. Might as well get in on a bit of the fun.”

“Wilbur has a lot to do here,” Tubbo said.

“We aren’t Wilbur, though.”

Tubbo stopped for a second. “That’s... actually a good point.”

Tommy stood up straighter and looked at him with a glint in his eye. “We could nick a horse. Be there by supper.”

Tubbo looked nervous. “Would... would they let us in?”

“*Would they let us in,*” Tommy scoffed, grabbing Tubbo by the wrist and pulling him away from the kitchen, ignoring his little squawk. “Tubbo, I’m a personal friend of King Clay. They’ll let us do whatever we damn well please.”

Sylvia was holding her own, private celebration.

Her fire flickered warmly in her hearth, and she hummed as she swept around the kitchen, pulling a loaf of fresh-baked bread from the oven. Her windows were open, her curtains fluttering in the breeze, and for the first time in decades, she used her magic without restraint, nudging the oven door closed and using a small spell to fill the room with the scent of lavender.

While the bread cooled and she waited for her pot of water to boil, Sylvia went into her garden. Her plants were blooming with the spring, yellow marigold and red roses and branches of honeysuckle surrounding her. It was here Sylvia had always felt closest to the earth, and to her magic; here she had always felt closest to her daughter, even after her death.

“If you could see what your son has done,” she said to the breeze, her eyes filling with tears, “you would be so proud.”

The wind knocking against the branches sounded almost like wind chimes.

The Mercian boys made it to Camelot just in time to sneak their way into the Great Hall for the feast, and although Tommy did an excellent job of commandeering his way inside, he really didn't have much of it to do; there was enough commotion and excitement for the two boys to go largely unnoticed.

The Hall had been transformed into an enormous dining room, long tables filling the space that had just recently been occupied with the war table, stacked tall with food, as decadent as any of the King's feasts. The room was packed with noblemen and civilians alike, knights and servants, all eating from the same tables, sharing wine and stories of the previous days.

Tommy and Tubbo grabbed plates full of food right away, sequestering themselves to the far corner and watching with amusement as the festivities carried on; musicians played from the opposite corner as one especially loud knight named Eret told the story of the battle to a group of nearby children.

“The magic light stopped the bad sorcerers from attacking,” he said grandly, “and then we fought them back, one by one, until they retreated – and Camelot was saved!”

“*The magic light*,” Tommy scoffed to Tubbo. “Give George a little credit, here.”

“Have you seen him, by the way?” Tubbo asked, scanning the crowd. “Or King Clay?”

“Come to think of it, I haven't.” Tommy felt an actual stab of worry. He had heard George had been seriously hurt – and he wondered if he was doing okay.

He didn't have to wonder for long. The doors to the Great Hall opened with the grand sound of trumpets, and every person rose to their feet in roaring applause as King Clay walked through the doors. Standing next to him, limping slightly but alive and smiling, was George himself.

Tommy leapt to his feet alongside the crowd, whooping loud enough that he earned himself a few glances from those closest to him – and from George, who seemed to recognize the cheer,

and whose eyes found Tommy in the crowd. George looked bewildered to see him, but he grinned anyway and waved at him weakly.

“That’s my boy,” Tommy roared as Clay and George walked through the tables, noticing how George leaned just a little against Clay’s arm, like he was using him for balance.

Clay turned and motioned for quiet, and a hush fell over the crowd.

“We have a lot to celebrate tonight,” King Clay said, his voice cheerful. “Our kingdom is safe. The war is over. And – as many of you have heard, and now understand why – magic will be restored to Camelot.”

There was a great cheer.

“The process of reintroducing magic to our lands will be an ongoing process with several challenges,” Clay continued. “And as such, I’ve determined I need an advisor – someone to help me oversee magical affairs. After... much deliberation,” he said, sparking a few chuckles, “I’ve decided who that person should be.”

He turned towards George, who sank to one knee in front of him, in a motion that echoed a knighting.

“George,” Clay said quietly, so that Tommy could barely hear him.

“What, do they think they’re the only two people in the room?” he muttered to Tubbo, who giggled.

“Do you swear to defend Camelot with your life, and to use your magic solely in defense of its people, and those who are helpless and in need of aid?” said Clay, his voice ringing clearer now.

“I swear,” said George.

“Then rise,” Clay said, “as the first Court Sorcerer of Camelot.”

Although Clay had to help George to his feet, the effect was the same. As were the cheers.

And of course, because Wilbur always knew what Tommy was going to do before he could do it, Tommy found a letter in his travelling jacket, addressed to King Clay. He delivered it sheepishly that night, watching the king skim it over briefly before smiling and thanking Tommy for the delivery. The letter read:

*To His Highness, King Clay of Camelot:*

*The war is over, and our initial reason for correspondence has come to a close.*



*I hope, however, to maintain our communication. I remember speaking to you briefly about a possible alliance, of sorts; a different kind of governance, less reliant on warfare and inheritance to sustain itself. Perhaps it is time for these old kingdoms to come to an end.*

*I would like for us to talk about this new system of governance soon. In the meantime, I hope our kingdoms can enjoy a period of peace.*

*Finally, I thought to inform you that Technoblade and his companion have moved on from Albion, in search of new lands to explore – and perhaps to conquer. Though it seems perhaps the two of you found some understanding – I would not want you to live in dread of another unwelcome encounter.*

*With well wishes, and, as always, in solidarity,*

*King Wilbur of Mercia.*

*P.S. You may keep Tommy for as long as you can tolerate him.*

---

The feast stretched well into the evening, the food good and the wine flowing generously. But long after the last drunken celebrators had found their way home – after George had found Tommy and Tubbo an empty guest room for them to sleep in before they returned to Mercia – after the lights had gone out in the castle, leaving it dark and peaceful, there was still one window left alight, two voices left whispering into the shadows.

Dream and George were curled up next to each other on their bed, propped up against the headboard. George's head rested against Dream's chest and Dream's arm wrapped around his shoulders. The fire was starting to dim in the hearth, and George lifted an absent hand to relight it, coaxing the flames back to life. He was still adjusting to the feeling of using magic without the light underlying his movements – but he liked it, in a way; he could feel the limits of his power, now, and they felt safe. He was still an elemental; his magic would never leave him.

“Tell me another story,” Dream mumbled sleepily, his hand tangling in George's hair. “One I don't know.”

George hummed and gave it some thought, his brow creasing. Then his eyes lit up. “I hit a bear with a rock, once.”

Dream's forehead crinkled, and he laughed disbelievingly. "*What?*"

"We were out in the woods," George said. He could still picture it, as clear as day. "Just you and me. You were up ahead of me, and – I stumbled on a great, huge bear, and it reared up and roared, and looked just about ready to gut me –,"

"You're making this up," Dream said, his tone fond.

"I swear I'm not," George said with a giggle. "I was so panicked I just – magicked a rock up and bonked it in the head."

This shook a real laugh from Dream, the kind that always made George feel warm. "No way."

"I knocked it straight out," George continued, "and I had no idea what to do. You hadn't seen anything, so I just – I just left it!"

"You left it in the forest?!"

"What else was I meant to do? How was I going to explain *that* to you?" George insisted, though he couldn't help but laugh at the memory as well. He had been so nervous at the time, so afraid that Dream would discover what he had done. It was so long ago.

"It feels like a lifetime ago," Dream murmured, echoing George's thought.

"I know," George said, turning his head towards him. "So much has changed."

Dream tilted his head, as though to disagree. "Well. Not *that* much."

"Oh, really?" George huffed.

"Sure, I mean, there's the whole *magic* thing –,"

"Mhm."

"And I guess it's a big deal that I'm the king, or whatever –,"

"Just a little."

"But it's still just us," Dream said. "It's still Sapnap and Bad, you know? It's still just the bunch of us, figuring things out as we go. Having each other's backs."

George pretended to consider it. "Well, when you put it *that* way..."

"I keep telling you, George, I'm always right," Dream said playfully, but he seemed a little distracted as George shifted position, swinging his leg over Dream's lap so he was sort of straddling him, and they were face to face.

"Still," George said, "I couldn't do this to you back then," and he leaned in to press a kiss to Dream's jaw – "or this," against his neck, "or this –,"

"Okay, I get it already," Dream said, pushing him off playfully, and George sat back, satisfied at the flush he saw creeping up Dream's neck. "You are insatiable, you know that?"

George grinned and shrugged, rolling back into his position, snuggling a little into Dream's side. "And what're you gonna do about it, Your Royalness? Tax me?"

Dream laughed again. “I gave you that fancy Court Sorcerer title, I can take it away...”

But for some reason, the trail of thought those comments sparked brought something back to the surface for George – something that had been shoved down under several layers of survival instinct over the past few weeks. He shifted and sat up, apart from Dream a little, his legs folded underneath him.

Dream seemed to notice the sudden shadow on his face, and he sat up a little, too. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s stupid,” said George, because it was.

“Tell me anyway.”

George looked up at him. “No more secrets. Right?”

“Right,” Dream said, his expression slightly worried.

George grabbed Dream’s hand, turning it over in his own, staring down at where their fingers linked. “What is... this? Are we a secret?”

Dream hesitated, and George couldn’t help but feel his heartbeat pick up in his ears.

“I don’t want it to be a secret,” Dream said, and George felt a small rush of relief. “I just want this. I want us - together. Is – is that what you want?” And for a second, Dream sounded *insecure* – a hilarious concept –

“Of course I want that,” George said fondly, and Dream’s face broke into a luminous grin, but as he leaned forward again, George brought up a hand to stop him. There was one final question on his mind. Maybe the only question left.

“You told me once that you – that your partnership had to be strategic.” George avoided the word *marriage*, as even uttering the phrase in this moment felt too vulnerable to handle. “I’m basically the worst strategic choice you could possibly make.”

“I wouldn’t say *that*,” Dream said, but George continued:

“I have no wealth, no power – my family has no influence, I’ll bring you no alliances. I know Wilbur wants to work with you, but you still have a long road ahead of you in uniting Albion. I – I don’t have any special power, anymore, and -,”

The words hurt, but he felt they needed to be said. Everything, *everything* that had been done up until this moment had been in service to their mutual destinies. To uniting Albion and restoring magic. This was a deviation, and George – George wasn’t sure he was worth it.

“This isn’t what’s best for your destiny,” he said, turning his gaze down.

There was a pause, and then Dream hummed, as if he were thinking about it. “Maybe.” He brushed his hand slowly up George’s arm. Then he pushed George down gently by his shoulder until George was lying on his back again. Dream shifted so that he was leaning over him, and George’s heart skipped a beat at the easy affection in his eyes. “I don’t really care.”

“You don’t?” George asked in muted surprise, his attention drifting to where Dream’s hands touched him, leaving trails of sparks.

“No,” Dream said, and brought a hand up to touch the side of George’s face. George melted into the touch, and Dream's voice was soft and sure as he said, “We’ve given enough to destiny. This... this can be for us.”

## Chapter End Notes

Please indulge me with this end note. I love this fic and this is something of an emotional ending for me!

This is the first long-form fic I've ever finished. It has been a wild experience and incredibly fun. The final word document for this fic is 100,884 words, and 183 pages long. I've written that all in under three months!

Part of the reason I've been able to write so much in so little time is because of quarantine, and I think this fic will forever stand partially as a testament to my experience with the COVID-19 pandemic. I've been in strict quarantine - and at times been totally isolated - since March, and it's led to some difficult times over the past few months. But writing this fic, and especially reading the comments you all left every week and seeing that other people were enjoying the story - those were genuine

bright spots for me during a time where I needed a few more bright spots in general.

While I tried to respond to as many comments as possible, I know I always missed a bunch. But I am going to make sure to respond to all of the comments left on this chapter, because I want you all to know how much they've meant to me. I also know there are a lot of people who have been reading and not commenting - I know because some insane number like 600 of you actually get emailed every time I post a new chapter! I should emphasize - **that is totally fine**, and nobody is ever required to comment, but if you've been reading along quietly, I would just love if you left a short comment on this one - just so I can thank you for coming along on this journey with me!

I have a lot of material I ended up discarding or changing from this fic that I have sitting on another document, and I'm thinking about starting a short 'director's cut' fic that will just be a dumping ground for the ideas and scenes that didn't quite make the cut for the full story. If that's something you're interested in, keep a look out for those deleted scenes, which I'll be posting in a separate fic on this account - probably sporadically over the next few weeks!

**[Update 11/17: *Protected: Director's Cut* is now up! [Check it out here!](#)** It's extremely self-indulgent and just for fun. And it contains an epilogue one-shot or two :D]

If you want to follow my writing, you can check out what else I've posted on AO3 or follow my tumblr (the link is below, in the fic end notes). Otherwise, thank you so much for reading *Protected* - for all the incredibly sweet comments and messages - and for turning this little story into a genuinely wonderful experience for me. If you enjoyed reading this fic nearly as much as I enjoyed writing it, I consider that a resounding success.



A

## End Notes

thanks so much for reading!!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!